

Iron Blood & Sacrifice

The Sons of Beli Mawr

Published by Eifion Wyn Williams

E-Book Edition.

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For Theo Wyn, Melody Hope & Lethina-Joan, Amelia Rose & Lincoln - the future.

From the Beaker & the Axe;

From the Beaker and the Axe come we men of Prydein. From the groves of ancient wisdom and thro' the mists of time we march, to live and love, free of spirit with a quiet and honourable intent. Enthrallled by mountain glen and stream, we cherish this old land of ours and in her warm embrace are happily content.

Keepers of the word from Druid to Bard are we, with honest, bright tradition in poem, song and selfless deed. Nature formed and nature loved, to cherish with delight fair music, melody and birdsong sweet. The half-said subtle humour prised, from elegance of mind and rapier wit, though tempered by a gentle step with swift and agile feet.

No longer will our sword-arms rise with vaulted bri and purest heart, alongside those whose glorious honour none could steal. But as our fathers oh-so bold and those who came before, who forged a golden history with their rare and matchless skills, they taught us well that tranquil thoughts and words of wisdom; rare as gold, be unconquered still. Eifion Wyn Williams.



The Sons of Beli Mawr - Preface.

Iron Blood & Sacrifice is set in 55 & 54 BC and in Late Pre-Roman, Iron Age Britain, prior-to and including Julius Caesar's exploratory forays in those years. History as we know is written by the victor, and Julius Caesar's history is a well-known *Roman* one. I hope these historically inspired novels will perhaps give the reader a taste of what 'may have been', the *Brythonic* perspective of the same tumultuous period in our history.

Beli Mawr was high king of all Britain, and he married Dôn, daughter of Math ap Mathonwy Fawr. She was the *real* 'mother of dragons', and together, they founded a dynasty of six children who would go on to establish kingdoms of their own in Prydein and create their own history, one which still vibrates with its enduring power to this day. Beli and Dôn's children have become eternal legend, and these five magnificent warriors were the all-powerful *red dragons* of Prydein to whom I pay honour and tribute in these books; Lludd 'Llaw Ereint' (silver hand), Caswallawn Fawr, Nynniaw; (champion of Prydein), Rianaw and Llefelys (of Mabinogion fame), have all become cornerstones of Cymru's history, its culture and its eternal memory. I hope that I have resurrected and reinforced those ancient blood ties which existed between Khumry/Cymru, Yr Hên Ogledd and the rest of an almost exclusively Brythonic speaking Prydein in these books. The trilogy storyline is based around the acknowledged happenings in these transformative years, with real characters and locations and I hope it reflects the known history. I hope too that I have captured the wild nature of the time in all three novels, but these books are at the end of the day works of fiction, although deeply inspired by my ancestors, their enduring culture and their true history. Please go to my website;

<https://iffy88227.wixsite.com/sonsofbelimawr> to download the 78-page, historic supplement to these novels, FREE of charge. There you can join my newsletter membership, Q&A Forum, and I have also posted a great many related photos, graphics and research material, which together will give the reader a much clearer picture of the times, the culture and the traditions in this ancient 'Brythonic' period. My Pinterest page is also packed with further information along with thousands of photos and graphics, all relating to the books and the period. <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/EifionWynWilliams/>

Eifion Wyn ap Huw Wyn ap John Wyn ap Elias Wyn - Williams.

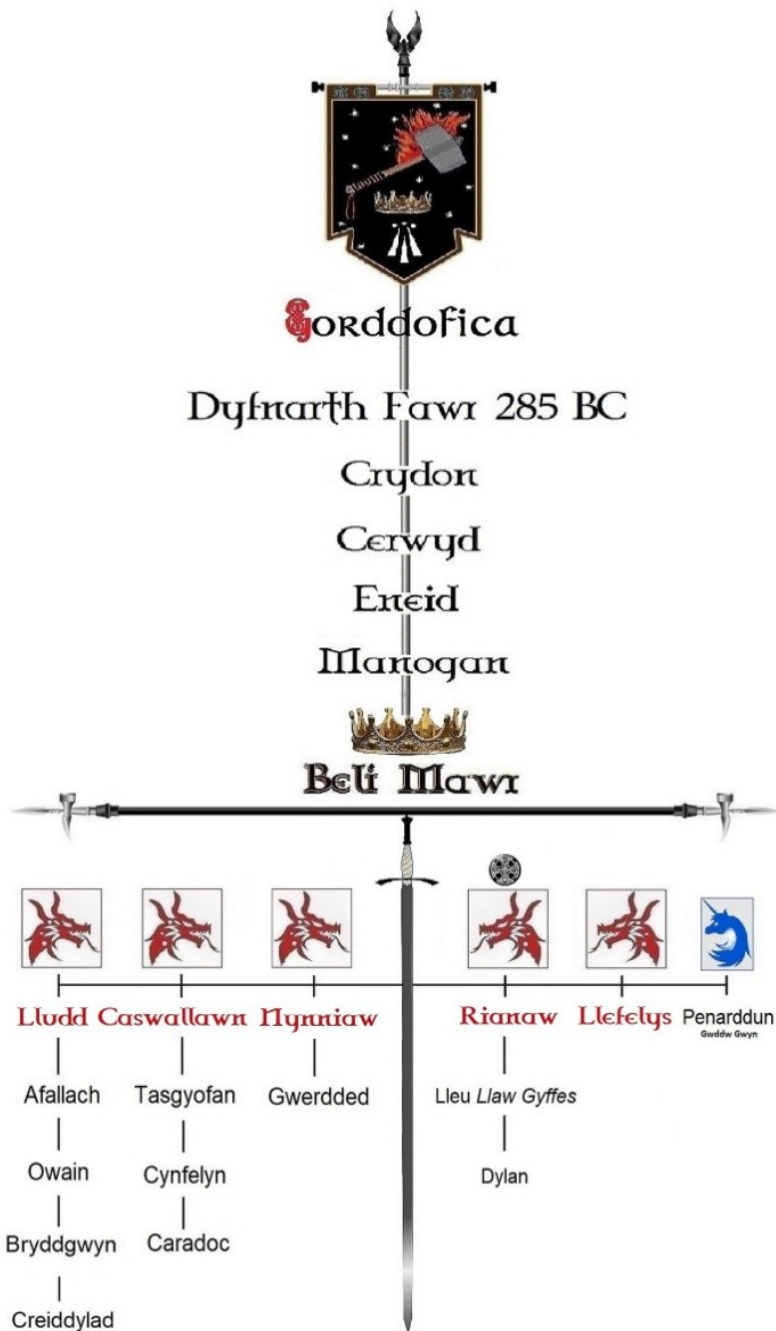
The Lineage of Beli Mawr.

King Beli ap Manogan ap Eneid ap Cerwyd ap Crydon ap Dyfnarth Fawr
(285 BC)

Kings of the Druids - *Pendragon y Derwydd*.

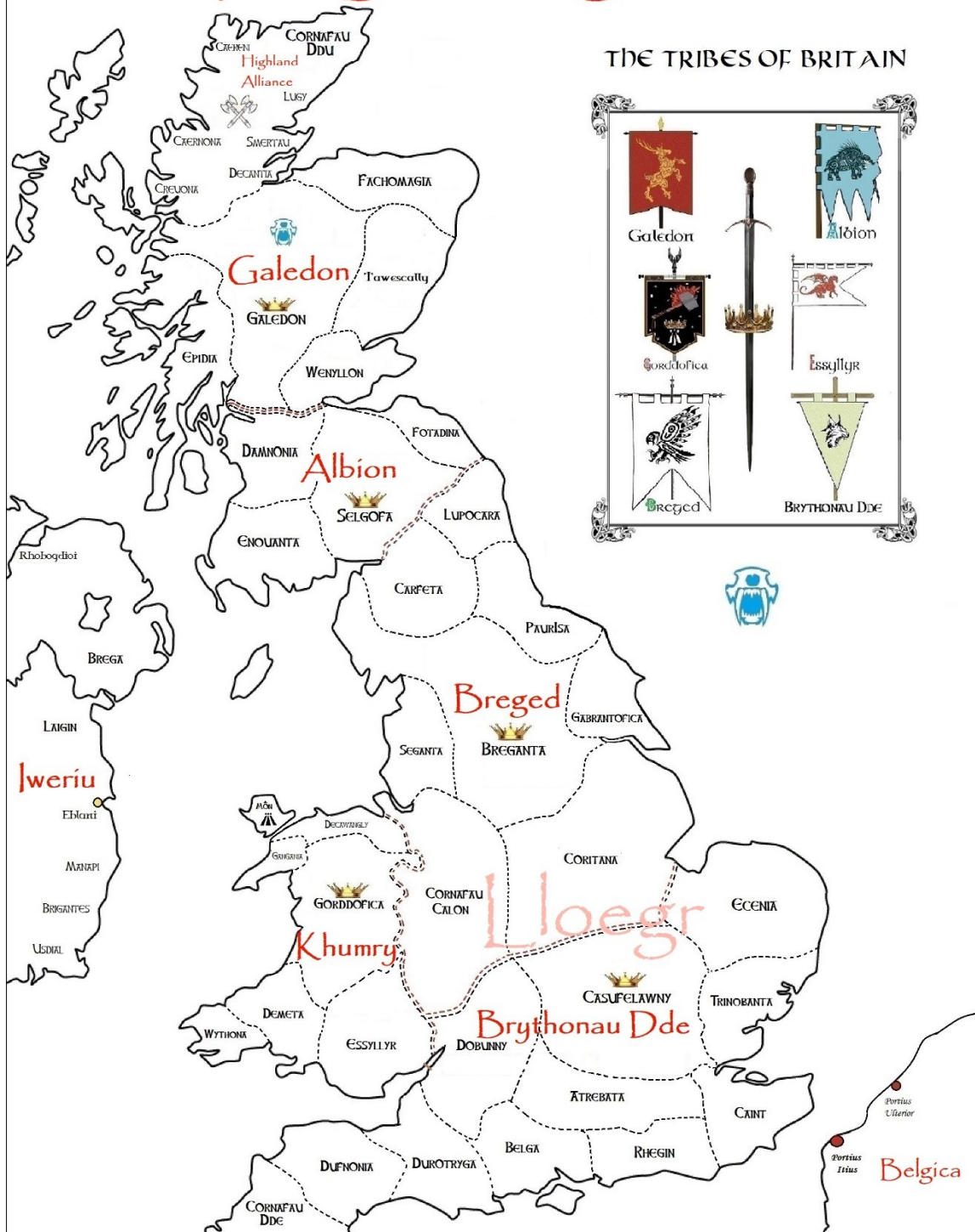
Beli Mawr Birthdate; Circa - 110 BC - Died Circa - 62 BC (aged 48).

Beli ap Manogan marries Dôn ferch Math ap Mathonwy and has 6 children.
(5 sons and 1 daughter)



IRON BLOOD + KACMIRIKV

Iron Blood & Sacrifice



The Tribes of Prydain in 54BC. (Brut y Brenhinoedd a Tywysogion)

- **Galedon (au)** (Ruling House of King Ederus ap Ewin ap Durstus Fawr - Stag)
- Galedon (au) (*Caledonii* - House of King Ederus - Stag)
- Tawescally (au) (*Taexali* - House of King Conal ap Cynal - Vixen)
- Fachomagia (u) (*Vacomagi* - House of Crown Prince Gallorc - Skull)
- Wenyllon (au) (*Venicones* - House of King Lleu Llaw Gyffes - Wren perched on dagger)
- Epidia (u) (*Epidii* - Crown Prince Galan & Prince Wrad - White & Black Stallions)
- Cornafa (u) Ddu (Northern *Cornavii* - Nêr/Gŵyr Brith Fawr - Battle Axe & Warhorn)

- **Albion (au)** (Ruling House of King Cridas ap Calgorad ap Calgus Fawr - Boar)
- Selgofa (u) (*Selgovae* - House of King Cridas & Crown Prince Cadwy - Boar)
- Fotadina (u) (*Votadini/Otadini* - House of King Cenwydd - Sea Eagle)
- Enouanta (u) ('Gŵyr Enouant' - *Novantae* - House of King Selwyn - Wildcat)
- Damnonia (u) (*Damnonii* - House of Crown Prince Berwyn - Bear)

- **Breged (au)** (Ruling House of King Bellnor(ix) ap Capoir ap Belleti - Eagle)
- Breganta (u) (*Brigantes* - House of King Bellnor & Crown Prince Cartysman - Eagle)
- Carfeta (u) (*Carvetii* - Military House of *Cadlywydd* 'General' Cadallan - Leaping Deer)
- Lupocara (u) (*Lopocares* - House of Prince Tarwyn - Stalking Wolf)
- Cornafa (u) Calon (Central *Cornovii* - House of King Iddel - War Horn)
- Paurisa (u) ('The land of Effwrog' - *Parisii* - House of Queen Morgu - Bronze Sword)
- Seganta (u) (*Setantii/Segantii* - House of King Seithenyn - Bow & Crossed Arrows)
- Gabrantofica (u) (*Gabrantovices* - Gŵyr Gofydd - Giant Oak Tree)
- Coritana (u) (*Coritani/Corieltavii* - House of King Afyn - Rearing Viper)

- **Brython (au) Dde** (Southern Brythons-House of King Caswallawn ap Beli ap Manogan Fawr - Lynx)
- Casufelawny (au) (*Casuvellauni/Catuvellauni* - King Caswallawn - Lynx)
- Trinobanta (u) (*Tinobantes/Trinovantes* - King Afarwy - Triskele - 'Triple Lobe')
- Ecenia (u) (*Ecenii* - King Praswtag - Bull)
- Dobunny (*Dobunii/Bodunni* - King Anted - Raven)
- Atrebata (u) (*Atrebates* - Prince Eppyll - Otter)
- Caint (au) (*Cantii/Cantiaci* - King Cyngetic - Trident)
- Rhegin (au) (*Rhegni/Regnenses* - Prince Rathyeu - Buzzard)
- Belga (u) (*Belgae* - Prince Oretan - Cougar)
- Durotryga (u) (*Durotriges* - Prince Gwaedan - Falcon)
- Dufnonia (u) (*Dumnonii* - Prince Glannach - Mole)
- Cornafa (u) Dde (Southern *Cornovii* - Dug Fawr Dodion - Sword & War Horn)

- **Khumry** (Ruling House of High-King Lludd ap Beli ap Manogan Fawr - Flaming War Hammer)
- Gangania (u) (*Ganganii* - Prince Gwaun - Raven Head)
- Decawangly (au) (*Deceangli* - King Bryn - Mountain Eagle)
- Gorddofica (u) Gogledd - (Northern *Ordovices* - King Gwerdded - War Hammer)
- Gorddofica (u) Dde - (Southern *Ordovices* - High-King Lludd - War Hammer)
- Essyllyr/Essyllwr - (*Silures* - Crown Prince Afalach - War Hammer & Red Dragon)
- Demeta (u) (*Demetae* - King Brithael - Black Fox)
- Wythona (u) (*Octipitae* - Gŵyr Galwyn - Eightfold Khumric Knot)



Chapter One.

The young man adjusted the long dagger at his right hip, crouched by the already filling print in the snow-covered track and looked around himself carefully, all his senses tingling. Laying the long and wickedly sharp hunting spear on the ground, he examined the deeply cloven impression with his right forefinger. Amazed at the size and depth of this deeply bifurcated pit in the stiff, snowy mud, it caused the dread vision of an enormous and murderous animal to rear uninvited in his mind once more. The irregular, sibilant thud of falling lumps of snow from the nearby trees only emphasised the eerie silence in this forest, and this earnest young hunter in his dark trews and padded leather jacket looked at his surroundings with the utmost care. His startling blue eyes flashed from under a beautifully tooled leather hunting cap, flitting from one open space to the next like a sparrowhawk seeking a vole. This vast forest surrounding him was dense with tall, soaring pines, and this hilly region he was climbing carefully was studded with sacred hazel, their tiny bunches of emerging yellow catkins catching the eye between the snow laden boughs of these reaching firs. The high ridgeline this hunter had followed for the last hour sloped downwards again now, toward the west where rowan and bird-cherry flourished, and the trees around him changed in this opening forest as it approached the coast. Here and there were towering oaks and venerable stands of ash which had clearly been coppiced for spears, and he was far more acquainted with this new sector he had just crept into. This familiar area of the great northern forest behind him was a second home to Cadwy, and his breath was pluming out before him now as he crouched, breathing evenly and with his eyes wide. Although dressed simply for the hunt, the cut and quality of his clothing bespoke his positions in life, and this fortunate young man was among the

privileged few who had free reign to plunder the animals of this royal game reserve at will.

The pensive, hushed atmosphere seemed to weigh heavily on Cadwy now, and he felt the spirits of this forest gather as he paused, tilting his head and bringing all his intense focus to bear on the undulating, snow covered ground around him. There was deadfall everywhere in this most ancient part of this most ancient of forests, and all was enveloped in a thick mantle of freshly delivered snow. Impressive stands of mostly blackthorn and holly bolstered the prodigious ground growth, choking some of the natural avenues through these tall trees and offering excellent concealment to the naturally and expertly cautious. Cadwy breathed in deeply through his nose as he crouched, twitching his nostrils to identify the rank and unmistakeably foul stench of his quarry, but Cadwy knew however that the titles of hunter and prey were yet to be confirmed this day. He exhaled hard then, his breath billowing from his mouth into the icy air as his narrowed eyes picked out the staggered row of these huge hoof prints among the smaller he had followed for so long, vanishing into a thicket ahead of him. His mouth was dry, his tongue furry and he ached from the long hours of tracking and from the two consecutive nights of rough sleeping, but he was young, he was fit, and he was especially determined.

Still crouching by a decaying length of deadfall softly draped in its white mantle and with his eyes flashing everywhere, Cadwy called upon all his superb training, forcing himself to become completely still and almost tasting the sharply cold pine scented air. He began sensing the changing atmosphere of this forest more acutely, and the softly vibrating space around him suddenly came alive. His heartbeat slowed, and this young Selgofan predator became one with this hushed environment, entering a mental zone of such slow clarity and blinding insight it was shared only by the very best of their fabled hunters. The sounds around him sharpened to a rustling minutiae now, and this amid the barely discernible waves of harmonic droning, emanating continually from the countless and unseen

insects around him. The complex mixture of aromas on this breeze began to take firmer shape then too in his nose and over the clean and acerbic smell of these pines. Although tainted by the rotting leaf mould under his boots and by that rank pile of fresh boar faeces to his right on this track, it all mixed with the underlying smear of wood smoke from a nearby char pit to present a veritable *soup* of aromas to his twitching nostrils. A wisp of steam arose like a spirit dancer from that pile of boar excrement it was that fresh, and a vole or some other tiny creature scurried away behind him at that unnerving moment. He could just discern the vibrating knocking of a woodpecker in the air through these dense trees and where he crouched with all his senses tingling by this snow covered fallen tree. That industrious bird was somewhere far distant, but his ghostly thrumming faded away as the forest directly around him became as still and as silent as a druid's grove. The once calm, almost joyful spirit of this ancient forest changed then abruptly, its peaceful and benign atmosphere lurching into the ominous in that quickened heartbeat, lifting the hair on Cadwy's arms.

The family of this young man has a long tradition of being *Ailyllwr*, the 'shapeshifting' hunters of Brythonic and Selgofan myth. Revered by all and considered Godlike in their hunting abilities, the *Ailyr's* legendary transformation into the animal they hunted is woven into all Albion's' fireside songs and stories. This is especially true of the ruling Selgofau, who, including today's ardent hunter are the settled descendants of these nomadic hunters. Those pioneering, indigenous hunter-gatherers from so long ago have become part of Albion's ancient culture and a glowing, enduring focus for all Prydein's proud history. It is known by the few that a small remnant of these wild, *shapeshifting* hunters still roam the land to this day, but to the many, these wraithlike and invisible people have faded from memory. The manner in which the 'Ailyr' and the hunters of old Selgofa mimicked the halting, infinitely careful movements of the prey they followed seemed to put them in a trance as they instinctively followed even the vaguest of tracks, with no thought of comfort or time. Honing their beguiling skills on bear, auroch, and the vast herds of

reindeer which populated these hills and forests in those days long past, they would swear after the hunt was over that they had actually *become* the animal whose tracks they had followed for cold and seemingly endless miles, until inevitably they would corner and expertly dispatch the beast. It is perhaps this ancient tradition which inspired the old ones to call them *Ailyllwr*, the 'shapeshifters' and Cadwy had been spoken of in the same terms, as now and again, perhaps once in every generation a child is brought back into this world with the unique, instinctual brilliance of those ancient, aboriginal hunters. The young and earnest Prince Cadwy of Selgofa and Albion did seem to excel in all the necessary martial and hunting imperatives, and he had proved himself an immensely skilled and adept hunter-warrior as he achieved manhood, perhaps even in the old tradition.

All Cadwy's instincts and hunting senses had now come to the fore, and he saw in his mind's eye the heavy and swaying gait of the huge boar he hunted. With his eyes closed, he could almost see the boar as it furrowed the snowy ground ahead with his tusked snout, always followed closely by his attendant family. Cadwy's head swayed gently from side to side as he visualised the direction this curious but exceptionally and instinctually careful animal would have taken from the steaming pile of his very recent leavings. Minutes later his eyes opened, regained their focus and he became intrigued by a snowy hump of growth to his left, roughly thirty *reeds* ahead of him. Each time he looked at this mounded thicket some kind of warning went off in the back of his mind, and his eyes were now locked to its white, lumpen outline. He had been trained to obey these impulses and these little alarm tickles that were once as faint as ghostly whispers but were now a vital part of his astonishing skill set. The slightest sound to Cadwy's right and behind him however made him freeze and just swivel his wide blue eyes around, over his shoulder and back across the animal track to place this tiny noise. Another faint and muffled click of a breaking twig from the same location gave him a new and finer point to his focus, and so he picked up and *hefted* his long hunting spear, reaffirming his grip on this solid and fearsome weapon.

Breathing deeply and moving as silently as he could, Cadwy swivelled to his right on the balls of his feet, to reposition himself so that he faced this new and hidden threat. All his intuition was screaming at him *not* to turn his back on the perceived peril from the thicket he had been studying, but Cadwy had to give credence to his ears and to the clearly heard sound now ahead of him. The deep and musical voice of his tad spoke in his mind at that invigorating moment; 'Your eyes may save the village son, but your ears will save your life!'

Another crackle of undergrowth came from the same place, ahead and slightly to his right now and from behind the dense bastion of blackthorn which hedged the nearby animal track, but the pulsing alarm in his head was clamouring louder now for him to turn back around. Looking again at the muddle of tracks in the snow he had followed for seemingly endless hours and the stinking evidence of his prey's passing upon it, Cadwy had to admit that they offered him no further clue as they simply vanished into the snowy undergrowth barely thirty reeds ahead. Although he had not caught one glimpse of the beast he hunted this day, Cadwy knew in his thudding young heart that it was close. In fact, he was sure that he had drawn very close to his quarry this last hour, closer than he had been since the onset of this hunt three days previously. Not just the freshness and size of that obvious boar stool told him that he was near, every trembling fibre of his being yelled it at him in a clamouring concert of confirmation.

Cadwy's scalp crawled then, and he realised coldly that the emboldened and murderous boar which had claimed the lives of a woman and her two children in a nearby village could be just about anywhere and watching him right now! 'But from where?' That was the burning question firing his imagination now, supplying him with several terrifying answers all at once, and his wide eyes flicked wildly from one hiding place to the next. Cadwy felt a small flutter of panic at this indecision which gnawed at him, making the hair at the damp nape of his neck rise painfully. He felt the sweat begin to pour down the inside of his thick leather jacket and the

heavy, chafing *llurig* shirt under it, and he wiped a bead from his forehead with a finger as he fought to control his emotions. Sweating freely now regardless of the cold, he felt it soaking his linen undershirt to the skin, but a calmness suffused Cadwy and his breathing deepened as he looked around himself carefully once more but with a finer focus. His excellent training had the desired effect of channelling his wild thoughts, reaffirming the wisdom of his father's words and demanding that his attention be aimed toward the clear sound that he had heard. He took a couple of deep but silent breaths before looking down to the ground, and he sent another fleeting prayer to the *horned hunt lord*, down to his Underworld lair.

"Arglwydd Cornonnyn; horned God of the green; lord of the forest, I offer you my prayer and ask for your blessing and your aid today as I hunt in your name." He half whispered the ancient and much used hunter's plea before kissing the iron band around his left wrist.

Eyes wide, heart hammering and starting to pant with the adrenaline, Cadwy took a deep breath and prepared to investigate the source of the noise. He was about to rise, when he realised with a dread feeling that he should not have ignored that instinctive *primary* alarm. That dense thicket which had triggered his earlier suspicions suddenly exploded into a violent outburst of enraged squealing and the loud cracking of breaking branches, directly behind him. Cadwy's head snapped back around, and the most enormous wild boar he had ever seen in his life burst from that undergrowth and came crashing headlong toward him. It was easily the size of a young bear, but with the wisdom of great age and being the head of its family, this hoary, belligerent and intelligent beast was far more deadly. This dominant boar's wicked, curving tusks were long, sharp and they were lethal. As Cadwy spun around to face this monstrosity, he became rooted with shock and his blood turned to ice water as his wide-eyed attention was instantly drawn to those deadly tusks. The wiry, brush like spine of this demented pig stood chest high to any man, and it was stiff with rage as it hunched its huge and bulging shoulders for the final,

murderous lunge. Long, slimy tendrils of saliva streamed from its yellowed stumps, and its huge, cloven hooves thundered the ground beneath it. Cadwy's mouth had turned to ash, and this pig's tiny, black and soulless eyes seemed to bulge from their red sockets as it charged him. This enormous and enraged beast was closing at a terrifying speed now, seeming to exult in its next human kill, and Cadwy had not moved a muscle.

Forty reeds from this sudden and violent eruption stood a group of impressive and wealthy looking horsemen on a hillside clearing. They were surrounded by a handful of smart spearmen all dressed expensively in the polished mail and green tabards of the Damnonian royal guard of DunAlclwyd, and each displayed the famous, embroidered cygil of the great standing bear on their chests. The regal and older looking man at the head of this mounted group was wrapped in an enormous black bearskin over hooded mail, this fastened with a bold and heavy looking gold brooch and chain. This stunning ornament was fashioned into the shape of a grotesque and hump backed boar, declaring this imposing man's proud bloodline to the world in no uncertain terms. A thin filet of the same buttery yellow metal pronounced that he wore the crowned helm of a king, and this lustrous helmet sat above a hard but handsome face adorned with a thick and full beard of grey streaked brown curls. Mounted on the most magnificent black stallion, this ruler stretched out a finely gloved hand to his brother's arm, who was mounted to his left and had drawn a long and beautiful yew bow. This prince had a weighted, broad bladed arrow knocked and ready, and he was clearly about to intervene.

"Let Arglwydd Cornonnyn decide brother. Let him be tested." The older man said calmly to him in a deep and musical voice, causing a look of surprise and re-evaluation in the younger brother's almost identical eyes, and before his fingers finally eased on the taut bowstring.

For young Prince Cadwy the seconds had trudged into treacle slow combat time, and he exploded into action now, driving his legs into the

hard earth, propelling himself backwards and away from the fallen log and the attack of this monstrous mankiller. The thundering, slavering boar charging him screamed in anticipation, its drooling mouth agape as it came on at an astonishing pace. The dirty and fearsome looking tusks dipped menacingly now the boar was mere feet away, and they kicked up snow and dirt in two curving grooves as they gouged the ground toward him. Cadwy could feel the same ground tremble under his boots, but he was brave, quick and had been well schooled. Clear of the obstruction, he turned back to this thundering animal, and he set his stance, the taut ropes of developed muscle in Cadwy's right forearm bulging as he swung the long and heavy spear around. Throwing himself headlong at the wild beast, this young prince of Albion thrust his weapon forward with all his might.

"CORNONNYN!" He roared the hunt lord's name, his heart hammering and his warrior spirit soaring as he speared the great onrushing boar.

There was an enormous crash, and Cadwy felt a massive, agonising impact to his right shoulder and his chest which drove all the air out of him. This was followed instantly by the distinct impression of flying backwards through the air before a bright flash of light exploded in his head and he lost consciousness.

Young Prince Cadwy now lay in his aunt's lodge, which served as an infirmary for the community which huddled inside and out of the great ditch system of this ancient feudal centre. This primary, coastal fortress of the Damnoniau is the capital of a powerful vassal principedom and a vital part of the Brythonic alliance in this 'middle' northern kingdom of Albion. This mighty stronghold is known throughout Prydain as DunAlclwyd or the 'Rock of the Brythons' and it is Crown Prince Berwyn of the House Damnonia's great peninsula rock fortress from where he rules their northern territories on his father's behalf. Berwyn's Damnonia forms an important borderland swathe of terrain, mostly separating the rest of Albion from the great federation of Galedon above them. High and mountainous Galedon; the vast, deeply forested and often ice locked

province to their north, known by the Albionau as the 'old enemy' and throughout the rest of Prydein as the *land of stone dwellings*. This impressive border fortress had been built on the foundations of a much older dun, founded on this peninsula of land generations ago and which pushes south like a giant phallus into the wide embrace of the great Goddess Clwyd. Here, Arglwydd afon Clwyd makes a fine and accommodating, womanly curve around the supporting embrace of Lug's rich land beneath her. Surrounded by the sacred and protective waters of the Goddess herself on three sides, this stone-built dun is well protected, also by both halves of the ancient and bifurcated crag which dominates the bulbous tip of this ancient finger of sacred land. The dun of the old people was built centuries ago here it's told and atop a single rocky pen. The bards sing to this day of when the legendary DunAlclwyd was sacked and burned, back before the time of the *long-slaughter*. The mountain dun itself was cleaved in two by the great black battle axe of GrutArd; the once immortal giant and the progenitor of the Cornafau Ddu. That immortal colossal had rent DunAlclwyd in two in a fit of spite and as he passed on his bitter northward journey, long ago and back through the cloying mists of a truly ancient time but leaving the sundered hill of Alclwyd still as eternal witness. Fragments from the fables of historic bloodlettings such as *PenAgr* and the *long-slaughter* have passed into the songs of Damnonia's children, as have GrutArd and all the other immortal warriors of old, sung on those cold nights when the ghosts of these long dead warriors walk again on Samhain. Samhain is the autumnal festival of the dead, when this peninsula and the land it springs from become crowded with deceased warrior ancestors as they wander aimlessly about, seeking that which they crave; *recognition*.

King Cylan's Damnoniau who now possess this great dun and have done for many generations since that long and dark period, and these industrious people have rebuilt and repopulated this fine fortress, and it now fills a broad and highly defensible stronghold sprawled across their bulbous isthmus. The fair paced afon Lefan rushes past this great caer on its western flank, falling four miles from the enormous, *old enemy* Loch

Lugh to the north and always providing fresh water even in a summer siege. The smaller but equally lively offering of 'Lug's water' passes below DunAlclwyd's eastern battlements, where at Aber Lefan they both finally make endless and righteous tribute to Arglwydd Clwyd herself, who in her deep and abiding love of the Brythons has protected the community of Alclwyd here for uncounted generations. Deep rows of ditches had been dug around the root of this peninsula many centuries ago and all along the northern, landward side. Its location and its natural circumstance had been much improved by these long years of industry, all of which made DunAlclwyd a well-protected fortress and accessible by one road only, in or out. At the landward approach to the dun's great ditch system, where the chariot ramp divides it and the land before it broadens into forest cleared plain lies the growing Tref Alclwyd, with over two hundred houses thatched and more being erected each week. All towns must grow, as handfasting continues and families grow too. Old men die, and those great warriors thus leave the Underworld to be born as new babies back into this world somewhere and at some point chosen by the Gods, closing the triangle of life, as it has always done and will do until the end of days.

This riverside fortress town lies handily on the south side of the *Ffin Gogledd Mawr*; a truly ancient, dual line of powerful ghost fences, both formed of spell wreathed and post mounted skulls. This 'Great Northern Divide' stretches from west coast to east across this country, forever separating the old enemies; the great nations of Albion and Galedon. Their ancient, druid-built ghost-fences are separated by a mile wide strip of densely forested and forbidden ground, representing a spirit haunted tract of cursed no man's land which no sane and mortal person would venture near by choice. Lying east of the great enemy Loch Lugh to DunAlclwyd's north, this ancient, ghostly border lies barely twelve miles from old King Cylan's stronghold. DunAlclwyd is Albion's northernmost 'watch' fortress and being so close to the old enemy is rich in battle history and honours. It is this close proximity to their age-old enemy by and large which has established swift succession and promotion within the ranks of the Damnonia military, as cross-border hostilities have been virtually constant

for as long as anyone can remember. DunAlclwyd is regarded throughout this land as a *lively* posting for any Albion warrior, and it is often remarked by visitors here that the gŵyr and officers of this northern borderland, although as broad and as hale as any northern tribesmen did seem uncommonly young for their vaunted positions. For some reason known only to the priesthood these bloody clashes have petered out of late, and it was three summers past when any significant blood was last spilled between these two great northern federations. It was during that skirmish that King Cylan had been sorely injured, and by nothing more technical or artful than a thrown rock. The Galedonian tribesman who had been lucky enough to unhorse the enemy king had little time to gloat, as he was cut to ribbons by the enraged Damnonian royal guard. The massive dent in the gold adorned helmet had told its own devastating tale however, and Cylan had not uttered a rational word since. The king of Albion lived but now had to be washed, dressed and fed by servants, as he constantly drooled; his wits dashed away by the old enemy. His son and heir Prince Berwyn had stepped forward as expected, and this earnest young prince now ruled Damnonia from this palisaded, peninsular watch fortress and in vassal service to his overlord King Cridas, high king of Albion.

In the upper chambers of this ancient inner keep, Crown Prince Cadwy's esteemed nurse is none other than the *Ddugesi* Meleri of Albion. This imperious 'Duchess' and Grand Lady Druiden of the Myrun Islands, is in fact the unconscious prince's infamous great aunt. Her fearsome reputation was confirmed anew today, as she barked her orders at the panicky looking gaggle of maids and servants who were rushing around this large nursing chamber of hers with a customary gusto. Each order was like the crack of a stockman's bullwhip, and the penetrating gaze of this indomitable Grandee never missed a trick, especially now.

Her patient's breathing was deep and regular, his pulse steady and strong, and she had just administered the infusion of comfrey and neaan nettle herself, using the feeding spoon-tube with which every physician was familiar. Meleri knew however that it was rest that held the real key

to the recovery of this young man's wits, and so it was she who had insisted Cadwy be treated here at DunAlclwyd rather than suffer the long return journey southeast to his father's Capital of DunEil. There was little she could do for the badly bruised chest, but his wisdom in wearing a mail shirt under his jerkin had saved him the lengthy pain of broken ribs and had perhaps even saved his life. Lady Meleri turned away from the bed, muttering to herself.

"Damn fool boy! Just like his tad and his taid before him. It's a cursed sickness of the blood, I'm sure of it!" She shook her head, determined to chastise young Cadwy for his recklessness when he recovered. "With Cornonnyn's blessings he managed to slay the beast, but what if *he* had been killed?" She grumbled to herself, and then shivered at her own foolishness, sending a silent prayer to Brigida to avert the omen of her thoughtless spoken words. Curling her top lip in disdain, she took a last look down at her unmoving charge in the big bed. "Men and their blasted bri!" She grunted. Standing straight, Meleri got a grip of herself before turning to survey the handful of industrious young women who did her bidding. She tried to recall the name of the local *aerwyr* as she took a last look around, so she could commission the making of a *bidog defod* from one of the tusks of the great beast, which was still hanging in the butchery downstairs. That monstrous boar had been the focus of much excitement, with queues of people lining up at the *Feis y Lladd's* door just to get a glimpse of the huge and hairy beast. It was hanging by its heels from a hook in the 'Master Butcher's' doorway and for all to see, as it had taken human life and its killing would be talked about for many weeks in these parts. A 'ceremonial dagger' would make a fitting birthday present for the young prince, and Meleri made a mental note to confiscate one of the huge tusks herself later for just that.

Rinsing out the bronze feeder absently and in a stout round basin which had been nicely let into this beautifully made pearwood cabinet, she finally felt able to relax a little now she was sure her beloved grandnephew would make a full recovery. This functional worktable with

its fitted clay bowl and with its drawers and cupboard below was fastened to the outer wall of her lodge, and she surveyed the view from the narrow and draughty window above it. Meleri had to screw up her tired eyes to get a better focus across the flowing, leaden surface of that broad river and the dark, rising lands behind it. Drying her hands, she glanced at the five-year calendar fixed to the wall of her station, and the slider on the large bronze plate declared that it was the twenty-third day in the third month of the year; that of *Onnen* today. She needed no plaque to know that this was the year 3912 since the creation of the world, but it did at least confirm that it was roughly two short weeks until Imbolc should be declared by her druidic order. The ewes were yet to lactate, and the blackthorn still held onto her blooms with a cold possessiveness in northern Prydein, but both these natural living creations would soon be forced to relent by the immutable power of Prydein's deities and compelled into the light of this new season. It brought into sharp focus the grand festival which accompanied this pivotal point in the year however, and all that portentous event meant to her and to this community. It struck Lady Meleri as peculiar once more calling the year 3912 since *creation*, as most of her order were well aware that the earth was far more ancient than a mere four millennia. She made sure that all her druiden students saw the seashells embedded in the rocks, and which she had brought back to her college herself from the very top of *Pen y Gogarth* in northern Khumry. Not only was it obvious that it would take far longer to turn a muddy seabed and the seashells embedded in it into rock, but more crucially to *lift* that same ocean floor to such dizzying heights would take countless eons. Even in a fraction of that vast and unknowable time, the exotic animals their ancestors hunted and painted on the walls of their caves were long gone and had vanished without trace. Ancient, physical upheaval of the earth was clearly not so unusual as the land is filled with evidence of such, but only a fool would miss the fact that the surviving formations were weathered to a degree that showed they were truly primordial. On her visits to that famed promontory in northern Khumry and elsewhere in this vast country, Meleri had seen where their

ancestors had dug the green rock from underneath that mountain and others with just antler picks. That noxious mineral was a part of the spell for bronze, which of course had paid for everything and still does. Miles of passageways and shafts had been tunnelled out below Pen y Gogarth by those ancient Brythons, and those prehistoric workings were themselves clearly thousands of years old, as the discovered, powdery and skeletal remains of those early miners had proved. The fossilised seashells she had found on the crown of that hill and on the far-distant, northern coast of Khumry were uncountable thousands of years older than the underground warren of workings deep below them, and it was a wisdom Meleri shared with all her students at *Côr Ynys Gwyn*, her college. In her opinion the date was merely a misunderstanding, and *creation* should be replaced with the word *discovery*. That was one of Meleri's core beliefs and this too she shared with all her pupils. Evidence of ancient, cataclysmic events which must have taken place many uncounted thousands of years ago lies everywhere in Prydein, yet such monstrous changes have never been witnessed in living or oral memory, which is mind-bogglingly long and fiercely guarded by the bards of this country of kingdoms. It was a nonsense to think that this earth was a mere four millennia old. However, this truly ancient and uniquely *Prydeinig* dating method was an established starting point for all its patent inaccuracy, and so Meleri and all Brythons used the timeline anyway. Some of the older druids would talk of a prime warlord who had arrived here following the big ice melt those eons ago, and long before the arrival of their Brythonic progenitor Brutus merely five centuries past. These bards would name this *first* man as one *Aedd Mawr*. Aedd Mawr was purported to be a Babylonian Hunter-God, and on arrival at these sacred isles had named these new lands he had found for his son and heir; Prydein. That great warrior chieftain Aedd's parentage was unknown, and so it was obvious to Meleri and to many others in the priesthood that Aedd Mawr had been Cornonnyn's own son, sent to earth in human form in *His* Godly name to claim these sacred islands of Prydein. Those elderly priests would state with authority that it was Aedd Mawr who had started the Brythons'

calendar from that moment of discovery. It had been Aedd Mawr who had then determined the thirteen months of the year and the twenty-eight days within each, and it had been that great man who had founded the four holy festivals of Prydein to suit his own hunting needs. Meleri believed it completely, just as she believed in her all-powerful Horned God as she held evidence of such in her extensive library of coelbren sticks and parchments at *Côr Ynys Gwyn*, and so her faith was unassailable. Lady Meleri was erudite and well-travelled too, aware of the differing calendars in use around the known world, but this Roman year of 699 had been brought into sharp contrast of late, particularly if the stark and persistent rumours were to be believed. Spring was weeks away yet, and this winter had been a hard and a cruel one with its remnants of dirty and frozen banks of snow still piled up everywhere. All the outer stone pathways and steps of this dun were still treacherous underfoot as *halen*, or white gold was used sparingly in this regard. The sudden loss of footing the previous week had injured her left hip, and the perfidious underfoot grip in this stone-built fortress along with the ungainly gait necessary now to remain on her feet hindered healing despite her excellence in all matters medicinal.

The pain in in her hip bit again then, and Meleri shifted her weight to the other foot disconsolately, realising that there was precious little anyone could do about ageing, apart from perhaps her mentor and the chief priest of this vast country who never seemed to age. Sipping the Betain dew had not helped despite its rumoured efficacy at addressing the medical difficulties of ageing, and Meleri replaced her equipment in the cupboard below with a grimace and latched both doors. Taking a fresh and washed burdock leaf from a lidded silver tray in one of the drawers and standing slowly upright once more, she began to chew it methodically for her pain. From another long and embossed silver box in this large drawer she carefully selected the correctly carved coelbren stick she needed from the twenty or-so in this beautiful case, and the one which would serve as her prescription. Closing this cupboard and scowling up at the dark, purple bruising of the evening sky through this window opening and the even

darker night clouds which scuttled across it, she knew they promised nothing but more rain. A sudden flash of lightning lit up the western sky, suspending the myriad drops of rain in mid-air for just a fraction of time, but for a little longer in her eyes. This confirmation that her weather judgement was still sharp elicited a satisfied 'harrumph!' from the great lady, just as Lord Taranu bellowed his high outrage at this lurid disturbance. The blinding appearance of the fleet-footed Lord Fwlch came again then; *He* who guards the heavens and shows his brilliance for the briefest of moments before vanishing, often long moments before the great Lord Taranu is even awake, when *He* begins to pound the heavens with his colossal hammer of doom in tardy and pointless protest. Lady Meleri turned her face from the window as fat drops of rain began to angle through it, and still chewing, she leaned forward to draw the outer, waxed timber shutters closed just as thunder shook the air with a sound like the rolling of some colossal quern stone across the heavens. Closing the finer made inner shutters against their leather gaskets, she twisted the bronze latch and secured this window with a satisfied sniff. Meleri then drew the heavy woollen curtains across to stop the draughts, before turning and resting her bony fists on her hips to survey her station in this caer. Disposing of the chewed cud in the fire, Meleri took a final, careful look around this chamber and one last lingering stare at her young nephew. Calling one of the attendant nursemaids over, Meleri handed her the prescription and gave her instruction on what to fetch for the prince's supper, and then Lady Meleri left the room abruptly as was her custom. Her personal handmaiden sprang to the door and opened it just in time, as this aristocratic matriarch swept through it without a trace of impediment like an unstoppable Phoenician trade ship in full purple sail.

Even the dust seemed to settle in this chamber as Lady Meleri departed, and Arwen looked across to her two companions who were to remain here at their posts, rolling her eyes at them as she crossed this big sickroom. They were all missing the great fayre in DunAlclwyd and couldn't wait to be relieved so they could take their part in it; the sounds and noises drifting in through these openings with the breeze all evening and noisily

informing them what they were missing. Tucking the coelbren prescription stick into the string of her apron, Arwen let herself out through the heavy oak door, missing completely their wry but knowing smiles in response. Heading down toward the kitchens on the ground level and eventually across to the other side of this great caer, Arwen was accompanied as always by the *slap-slap* of her woven leather shoes on these cold flags. The cracked plaster walls and the endless procession of split tree rafters overhead did not even register, as Arwen had lived in DunAlclwyd from birth and knew every inch of the place. She was soon out in the open air and heading down the wide, stone steps to the trader's lane which snaked around this fortified peninsula and wound its way onwards up to the town. Thankfully the rain squall had moved inland, and turning left along this familiar path, Arwen headed around the mount and toward the raucous harbour ahead. The seagulls were garrulous overhead now the storm had passed, competing with the drunken celebrants all around her, and Arwen had to push past them, threading herself between these groups of laughing and carefree people as she followed this lane around the solid mass at the heart of this peninsula stronghold. This broad pathway was busy even as dusk approached, and Arwen nodded here and there to those she knew and studiously ignored the mindless, but she hurried on without stopping to talk to anyone as she still had work to do.

The purchase had been routine, and with the basket of fresh oysters in the crook of her left arm Arwen headed back toward the river and the main gates of this huge dun. She had to concentrate hard as she stepped down onto the approach road as these boisterous, drunken people around her were getting wilder. If the prince's oysters got dashed to the ground and spoiled there could be no excuse, and Arwen would face the verbose ire of Delwyn *Gorun*, the voluble chief steward of the kitchens for her carelessness. This tribal conurbation is home to almost three hundred warriors of the Damnoniau, and most of them look to be out tonight, gathering in familiar groups and none seemed too sober. Prince Berwyn ap Cylan is playing host to King Cridas and his son Prince Cadwy of Selgofa this week, attended by their hunting party of young nobles, their

families, servants and all their necessary slaves. All the *werrin* of Alclwyd were galvanised on the ruling king's visits and this whole peninsula had become very busy this week, almost doubling Arwen's duties. The air and this whole peninsula seemed clean and fresh following the deluge, and she spat to the wet dust of this broad pathway as the soaring battlements of DunAlclwyd came back into view. The flying banners on their high towers reached up into the darkening sky of this swiftly approaching night, and Arwen noticed once more the light which shone from the topmost chamber, as it now always did. The highest reaches of DunAlclwyd's inner keep were now reserved for the 'mad' king of Damnonia, and the main door to the top chamber always has the key in the *outside* of the lock. Cylan *Wyllt* has deteriorated of late and must now be kept under guard, out of sight and out of mind.

The stewards were just starting to light the long rows of torches leading to all the caer's entrances, and Arwen took the quieter servant's lane to the eastern sector, the prince's oysters secure. More relaxed now, her mind focused on the immediate and Ceirios her lover, who was a cook and the person Arwen had to liaise with to organise the prince's supper. The iron latch on the huge oak door was as stiff as ever, and Arwen let herself into the long and draughty scullery with a shove, closing its heavy door behind her thoughtlessly with a foot. She rarely used the magnificent front entrance leading to the inner palace lodgings, those which permanently house the Damnonian royal family, their priests, their attendant guards and any noble guests who may be visiting. Only the aristocrats and royals used those two huge oak doors, but Arwen knew all the apartments and corridors of this massive fortress intimately as she had cleaned them and swept them throughout her childhood. The interior décor of those public chambers reflected not only the wealth and tastes of her liege King Cylan and his family, but they displayed the artistic and crafted finery that only came from accomplished foreign trade. All in Albion knew that these imported goods came via Marsallia on the Galliad coast or are carried hither from all manner of foreign lands by the trade sailors of the world with their distinctive purple sails. Most in the north are aware of the

influence those elite, global travellers made on a primitive Prydein when they first arrived here almost two and a half millennia ago, transforming not just this vast country but also the huge island nation of Iweriu across the northern channel. Fanatical devotees to Bel himself and coming from the sun worshipping centre of Cilicia in Anatolia, these Phoenician elites had landed near Erin in the high north, and the swift developments in this country following their arrival encompassed all the arts, from warfare to religion and everything in between. Their solar crosses, swastikas and fire-wheels became sacred icons across these territories, being venerated by sculptors on our stone monuments across the hills and mountains of northern Prydein for centuries, and with their superior knowledge in so many vital things, all Prydein had been transformed in just a few generations. Arwen flocked to the wharves on each of *their* arrivals along with everyone else in Tref Alclwyd, as the Phoenicians' cargoes were always deeply fascinating to the werrin of this isolated corner of northern Prydein. Most of the dusty old relics belonging to the *mad king* had been recently removed by the son, and Prince Berwyn's cherished and newly installed furniture had all been crafted by local artisans. In his refurbished main *croeso* hall the central bench seat had been carved with a family of otters clinging to it, one cheerful otter supporting each of the six legs of the bench. All were floating on their backs as was their custom, and it was as delightful to behold as it was to sit on. The deeply scalloped back panel and seat of that exquisite bench was carved in the form of a small waterfall, giving the otters their playground and it was one of Arwen's most loved pieces of furniture. It was one of eleven such beautiful and inviting bench seats placed around the king's new welcome hall, and in her time Arwen had polished each of them to a glowing honey colour. This cold and draughty scullery was a far cry from that ostentatious display of wealth matched in all the *public* places, but Arwen was at her ease in these kitchens and refectories with the rest of the servants, feeling at home here amid the press of busy bodies, the heat, the smoke and the steam. The smile came naturally and from her heart as she pushed the door open and slipped into the huge butchery leading to the kitchens, and

it was returned by all the bloody workmen, cutting, sawing and hanging their produce. Bowing her head to the big red faced and sweaty *Feis y Lladd* who was dragging another squealing piglet to the slaughter, Arwen pressed on toward the kitchens, looking forward to seeing Ceirios' loving face. A loud, crunching *thud* behind her curtailed the pig's screeching in a heartbeat, and without a backward glance Arwen stepped up the short flight of steps to enter the rear service area to this stone built inner keep. Ceirios was waiting for her at the steward's station in this long hallway and his toothy smile tripped her heart.

"Are you well my love?" His dark eyes twinkled as he took the coelbren prescription stick and the accompanying basket of oysters from her with a smile and before passing them back to a co-worker, who vanished in a flash. Arwen would have to wait while the oysters were shucked, minced and fortified with the specific herbs listed on that coelbren stick. One of the senior nurses upstairs would handfeed this nutritious and medicinal mash to their patient, and so Arwen leaned against the cold stones of this inner wall and by the wide timber hatchway which was Ceirios' working position.

"I am well Ceirios. How are you this evening?" Arwen responded, feeling her heart thud that familiar rhythm and the tightness squeeze her chest, betrayed as always by the flush to her throat.

"I am the happiest of all Damnoniau this evening Arwen *cariad*, after 'last night'!" He admitted pointedly, giving her a lascivious wink and making her blushes deepen. They had taken their relationship to the *physical* plane last night for the first time and had explored it throughout the dark hours. Her blood fizzed now from the memory, and she could feel the blood rise up her throat. "And I will be again tonight my love when our work is done, and we are alone together once more." Ceirios added with a quiet growl, those eyes of his flashing dangerously. Arwen blushed properly then, as this big passageway was suddenly busy with people, and it seemed as if some of these hungry visitors to Ceirios' counter knew well their secret. Her colour deepened, but she was no pushover.

“You seem very sure of yourself Ceirios?” She arched an eyebrow at him, standing straight and trying to remain calm and unruffled, but it was not easy with *those* eyes appraising her as they had for many weeks past, but then her own smile let her down. Putting her hand over her mouth, Arwen tried to cover her own amusement and her blossoming feelings, memories of his hands caressing her body rushing at her. Ceirios just laughed, showing his lovely white teeth through that engaging smile of his, just as the prince’s tray was brought out from the kitchens behind him. His smile deepened with indulgence as he passed her Meleri’s burn-carved prescription and then the heavy silver tray, which had been draped with a large square of pristine white linen. The woven basket she had handed in had been one of the many hundreds of such in use about this huge fortress and had been thrown onto a pile no doubt to await its recirculation by one of the many teams of industrious children rushing about this fortress, its supporting peninsula and the adjacent town. This silver tray Ceirios handed her carefully was altogether something else and exclusively reserved for the lords and ladies of this fortress. Although it was polished soft from its great age, it was thick and clearly worth a fortune so she dared not drop it. Tucking the old stick into her apron once more, Arwen had to grip the sides of this valuable silver tray just to stop her hands from trembling. She gave him another smile of her own and a nod of thanks as she took it from him, remaining as calm as she could, but her eyes were unconvincing, and they drew a broader grin from the handsome cook.

“I’m almost done for this night Arwen, so I will wait for you at the porter’s gate my lovely, and then we can have supper at *The Armoury* together before I show you around the fayre!” He gave her another wink, still smiling before then turning to his duties.

Heading up the inner passageways, Arwen could not help the giggle that erupted from her, and she shook her head as she hefted this weighty tray, still smiling to herself. She pushed on with her blushes finally subsiding, and the next door was helpfully opened for her by a passing porter.

Treading up the long, stone passageway ahead, she headed for the high royal quarters of this dun in great spirits. Thrilled that Ceirios was indeed very sure of himself, she looked forward to a fine supper in the best alehouse in Alclwyd once her shift was over, followed by the fun of the best fayre in all Albion. Arwen's smile endured as she trod these cold but familiar passages and stairways, a childhood song playing on her lips as she tripped along. The walls here were finer and freshly painted, bearing fewer cracks, and Arwen carried the laden tray through these bright hallways to the *royal* living quarters of the *Rock of the Brythons* singing quietly to herself.

The Damnoniau are expert miners, from coal to gold and almost everything in between. Huge deposits of copper and lead had been discovered on their land along with much silver and more than a little gold from their rivers, and the export of these minerals and ores have made them extremely wealthy over the years. DunAlclwyd; now the *Llys* of Berwyn has many more than the *nine* virtues strictly required of any Brythonic palace; those of a great hall and a lodge of living quarters, a brewery, a buttery, a stable and a doghouse, a barn, a kilyn, and finally a dormitory for the royal guards. All else was wanted and not needed, but it was a strange and alien monarch altogether who lived in poverty from choice. Pelts of exotic foreign animals with bizarre and alien patterns softened her footsteps, and tall pairs of finely wrought bronze urns from Tyre itself graced the spacious *ystafell croeso* of Berwyn. These sculpted leviathans stood alongside elegant, long handled and beautifully decorated amphorae in red slipware from the Greek Islands apparently, but none of these exotic imports registered with Arwen tonight as she passed absently through these fabulous state rooms. Even bizarre looking tribal pottery from Antioch sat in petal strewn alcoves and between the beautifully carved benches, above which heavy woollen tapestries colourfully warmed the stone walls. She loved these wall hangings as they were alive with the intertwined, whirling and animated designs most loved by her and her people. All this declaration of her ruler's wealth and good taste was barely noticed this evening by this fleet footed nursemaid

however as the ice under the oysters was beginning to melt. Arwen did bow her head to the grotesque and humped, wild boar banner of the ruling House of Selgofa which now shared the back wall of this huge stone chamber with the rearing brown bear flag of her tribe. This enormous banner was displayed as a mark of deep respect for their honoured guest; the great High King Cridas ap Calgorad ap Calgus Fawr of Albion. Arwen and every soul in this territory knew the enormous boar banner was displayed not only in vassal honour, but also in recognition of the ruling king's dogged statesmanship and his tireless efforts in forging what was for many ages deemed an impossible goal, and Arwen honoured both huge pennants at each passing.

Ruling King Cridas of Selgofa had struggled for years to affect the joining of the diverse and clannish tribes of this northern territory of Prydein known as the 'land of rivers'. Turning it into the small but powerful nation of Albion had become his oft-declared mission in life. Attempting to once and for all establish this middle northern kingdom as a *federation* had been a decade-long battle of both wits and power by all accounts, sandwiched as it was between the 'land of stone dwellings', the huge federation of Galedon to the north and the enormous state of Breged to their south; the 'land of lakes', and which itself sits above Lloegr, the vast southern territories known as the 'land of moonlight' in days long past. The king of Albion would be the first to admit however that he was a long way short of that ideal, but he had managed to put in place a functional and mutual alliance at least, one which got stronger and more reliable with each year that passed. Everyone spoke of the grander ideal of the *federation* in emulation of their great neighbours, but it was proving to be something far more alive and elusive than King Cridas had ever bargained for. In fact, if the enduring rumours were to be believed, keeping the status-quo and dissuading his vassal tribes from recommencing the cross-border raiding into old enemy territory had been incredibly difficult. Cridas had discovered that preventing the longed for, cross border head hunting of generations was a thing far more slippery than any wet trout he had ever caught by finger tickling as a child.

Two enormous boar spears were mounted crosswise behind those pennants at the back of this long and well-furnished reception chamber. These were surmounted by an even bigger round shield, and this monstrous thing was centred by a huge bronze boss in the form of a snarling and angry bear's head and face, far bigger than any man's head. These monstrously oversized arms were clearly impossible for any mortal man to even lift let alone wield, but they were solid evidence in support of Berwyn's claim that the Damnoniau were indeed descended from giants. Arwen hated those ludicrously oversized armorials, as it had been her who had been forced to clean and polish them for years. Her coming of age had been a blessing, and the resulting elevation and this new position of trainee nurse to Lady Meleri had seen the final transition from girl to woman. Carefully and expertly balancing this heavy tray in one hand and manipulating the iron latch to the door leading up to the private apartments, Arwen stepped through this thick doorframe and bumped the door closed behind her with her right hip. Above these public welcome chambers lay the private and spacious lodges of dry, finely furnished rooms which are always kept for ruling King Cridas and his large retinue should they visit, or indeed any royal entourage of Albion. Great celebration is undertaken when they do, with the roasting of many beasts and the fermenting of huge cauldrons of *curmi-da*; the ferociously powerful barley beer that is brewed up and down this country. This present '*gwledd y croeso*' fills the inner courtyard tonight, and the sounds drifting and fading on the wind even carried to these inner chambers, building Arwen's excitement. She turned left toward Lady Meleri's private quarters and her familiar royal nursing room, her thoughts filled with the evening ahead, as in just a few minutes she would be free.

Dusk approaches, and this 'welcome feast' is now coming to an end. A dark cloud hangs over the royal nursing lodge in the high and brightly lit quarters of this huge fortress, and there is a bittersweet flavour to the evening's remaining festivities across this peninsula. The popular and young Prince Cadwy had been blessed with countless dedications and prayers throughout the community this night, but especially in the ale

houses, where the huntsman of note shares the respect of the blooded warrior. These feast-centred celebrations are always enjoyed by all the townsfolk of Alclwyd, and the open spaces of this fortress are thronged tonight with its lively, gregarious inhabitants and its hard-working subjects. The legendary barley beer of the Damnoniau flows freely amongst the werrin, as does the *medd-tanllys*; their infamous ‘fire-mead’. Fine, continental wine and the sweet local mead flows between the nobles, just as the singing and the poetry flows over everyone. Melodious music from portable harp, crwth, reed and drum seem to come from everywhere tonight, accompanied as usual by the complimentary and sonorous voices of the bard trios, each singing in one of the three sacred voices, in perfect harmony and to their own enraptured group of listeners. The families sit where they can on the grass verges around the fringes of these grounds, passing parcels of smoked meat, butter biscuits and oatcakes to each other. The men sup their frothing logs of *cwrmi-da* and enjoy the festival atmosphere, where all weapons are banned and order is strictly controlled by armed household guards. All manner of dogs from the caer and the tref wander around as the scraps on offer are too good to miss, but most lie at the feet of their masters, content to be present and involved. The excitement of the crowd is palpable tonight, and a hubbub of indiscernible noise ushers from them with the odd shout or call here and there standing out. *Adlonnwyr* cheerfully ply their jester’s trade, and various other entertainers vie for people’s attention around the maes, whilst a few older druids wander around offering small prizes for solving a *pos*; a cunning mind puzzle or riddle. The wrestling and the *cled y pren* are always hugely popular, and these bouts of ‘wooden sword fighting’ take place on a roped off section of the real single combat practice ground. The fighting is always intensely competitive even at this local level, but larger, more important tournaments are held at each of the four main festivals of the year. Although deaths are extremely rare, being knocked senseless is a common reward for the partaking along with a great number of largely superficial cuts and bruises. Swordsmen, who for a living compete to the death with sharp blades come from across the

country to compete in the bigger tournaments of *cledd y pren*, as not only is it huge fun, but the competition is fierce and some of the prize purses are also well worth the travel. Many wagers are placed on the competitors, and local entrants are always hugely and raucously supported. No helm, shield or armour are allowed just trews and a jerkin, and so *lord* and *lackey* fought alike on a level playing field. All their wooden swords were drawn from a barrel full on offer and could be replaced at will, all being identical and stoutly made by the same local woodsman. The single combat arena was always surrounded by a hooting, laughing crowd of people for any bout, and it was thronged this night with the happy Damnoniau. Here in high northern Prydein, these riotous matches were always boisterously supported by the werrin, the elite protagonists being loyally followed and loudly cheered. Many warriors of note came to watch, as some of the moves and tactics on display are occasionally of the highest order even with wooden swords, and much can be learned. The serious fighting is always interspersed with comical bouts between two *adlonnwr*, and the crowd roar with laughter on this memorable evening as two of these clownish jesters chase each other around the ring, clapping each other across their rumps with wooden swords whilst their wrist and ankle bells jingle with every exaggerated step. Many families are camped out on the wide expanses of sandy grass around this large courtyard, making the utmost of these infrequent and much welcomed celebrations. Babes are in arms, children are sprawled on the grass with their dogs, always near their parents and who sit with their arms thrown about each other. The aristocracy and the werrin alike enjoy the choral performances immensely, and whole families would sway gently to the haunting, tragic songs of 'Arglwydd Clwyd', 'The Death of Beli Mawr', the 'Conquests of Cyrs' and many other cherished, deeply moving englynys. All who listen are immersed in these beloved song tales of the past, each carrying ancient silver threads of early knowledge and recalling unbelievable and heroic acts by the long dead but ever-honoured warriors of their ancestors.

As a gentle dusk descends on this united community of Alclwyd, the warm comradeship of these gathered families and friends grows as they eat, drink and share tales or jokes together amid much laughter, content with the final but happy moments of merriment which still lay ahead. As the dying sun finally begins to vanish below the sharp western palisades and the dark, rolling silhouettes of the distant hills beyond them, it set afon Clwyd afire, here where *Her* flanks finally begin to broaden into a glorious aber. Bel's glowing coattails transformed this sacred, rippling surface into a flowing blaze of liquid colour, widening as it snaked westward toward the unseen ocean. The sky turned to the darkest blood above this glowing, gliding fire snake of glittering water, and as it slithered west past this busy peninsula, it signalled the start to these people's new day. Bel's glimmering passage to the Underworld threw huge, slowly moving shadows across this vast interior, and the people sitting around it began to stir, as did their dogs. Although well short of sacred midnight, these people's young and hugely popular prince was on most of their minds in these hushed and hallowed moments of ostentatious sunset, and many sent prayers to one or other of Prydein's great deities in Prince Cadwy's name as they gathered their children and their belongings for the walk home. Arm in arm, Ceirios and Arwen sent a fleeting prayer of their own to Brigida on their prince's behalf and for her undeniable healing powers. As they made their weaving and inebriated but happy way off this peninsula and toward Tref Alclwyd, this young and enraptured couple passed puddles of sleeping, exhausted revellers on this broad and sandy pathway and it made them both smile. Weaving between the equally unbalanced walking-drunk on this lane and with the flaming, rushing waters of afon Clwyd a constant, glimmering companion to their right, they headed for Ceirios' steadily smoking thatch in the twinkling town ahead, his warm hearth and his soft bracken, both still smiling.

Cadwy lay as if asleep in a stout timber bed built to one side of this large sickroom, and with the final glimmers of light glowing redly through two narrow openings to his left, it was utterly peaceful. This quieter part of Lady Meleri's private quarters is situated at the back of the dun, mostly

for the sunlight and fresh air it receives but cannily nestled from foul weather between the pair of big craggy rocks which dominate this walled fortress. The stone block walls of this big second-floor chamber are hung with stout wooden shelves filled with all manner of pots, vials, bottles and jars. Dried grasses, bunches of herbs and various dried fruits and berries hang in netting strung across one corner of this room, filling it with a pleasing and complex aroma. Although a tended fire crackled in the hearth, one crack had been left in a window shutter to allow the ingress of fresh sea air. With her hands on her hips, Meleri struck her usual pose, looking down her aristocratic nose at the pale young man in her care. The chambermaids were gone now and stealing a glance toward the teenage nurse remaining on the stool beyond the hearth, she frowned, shaking her head a little before taking another last look around. Content that all she had demanded was in place or being done, she did not for one moment let this show on her face. All her nurses and chambermaids had been utterly distracted with what was going on outside, and she had been cracking the whip throughout the day to keep them all focussed on their duties. With a final, stern look at the young, plump and inexperienced nurse tasked with this final watch, Meleri scowled as she had little confidence in her. However, communication in this great caer was superb from necessity, and leaving strict instructions, Meleri was comforted that she was just minutes away in any emergency. Gathering her skirts in one hand and gripping her walking stick like a weapon she swept through the door, her bored looking hand maiden having to wake up quickly to allow her passage.

A little later, Meleri's young and somewhat overweight nurse had been dismissed, and three of the nobles who had witnessed the earlier hunting incident in the forest stood to one side of the young prince's bed now, exchanging meaningful looks.

"Did you ever see such a beast Cridas?" The younger brother asked, a look of wonder on his broad and bearded face.

King Cridas nodded slowly in response, not taking his eyes from the still form in the bed, the bedcovers rising and falling shallowly but regularly. The king ran his fingers thoughtfully through his greying beard, a huge, blood red ruby on one finger glinting as it caught the light from the fire. He raised his head, and his intelligent, slate grey eyes narrowed, furrowing his brow.

“Mmm, Taid Calgus told us once about our tad as a young man, and the infamous boar he hunted; *Gargon* the child killer, do you remember Brac?” Cridas turned to his younger brother. “And how tad hunted it down for eleven days and nights in the heart of winter and with nothing but a *war* spear. Finally killing the beast at the foot of the Black Mountain.” He added wistfully, a far-off look in his eyes.

“Why yes, of course I do brother!” Prince Brac responded with a broad smile. “Tad’s infamous *barn-isarno*! Taid told us he was so proud of tad when he completed his ‘iron-trial’ so brilliantly, and the englyn he had Morfyl write and sing to his honour is still sung today! ‘*Gargon hyll, the bladed beast of Bryncol Woods!*’” Brac intoned the childhood song. “I haven’t heard that dread name in many a year brother.” Brac smiled. ““As big as a donkey, as wiry as Lug’s great hairy arse and the weight of three fat men! The great beast had a pair of curving tusks like horse swords, and they were just as sharp!”” Brac did a fair impression of their late father’s deep baritone, drawing a wry smile from his older brother. “It killed dozens of people, including many children before tad killed it as you well know Cridas, at what is now called Calgorad’s Brook to his infinite honour. Reminds me of our brother Brynig who was given the tusks! Damn, I haven’t thought of him in ages to my eternal shame!” Brac admitted ruefully and with a sudden frown.

“Life goes on brother; we still honour our brother’s memory each Samhain.” Cridas countered lugubriously, recalling the death in combat of his older brother Brynig and the heir to the Selgofan throne almost eight years ago. It was only through his death that Cridas had acceded to the

throne of Selgofa and then Albion itself, and he sent Brynig a fleeting and silent prayer to his honour.

“Well, I’m not sure we can equate the killing of Berwyn’s great pig to *Gargon*, and Cadwy was only out three nights Cridas, but the werrin of the town are beside themselves with excitement, and the *englyns* have begun already! I’m not sure this boar could be compared to the mighty *Baedd of Bryncol*, but it was an impressive kill nonetheless and you must be very proud of him, I know I am!” Brac added thoughtfully, glancing at the object of their conversation and their shared concerns.

“It’s a damn shame he had to go and bang his head like that, but the turn and thrust was a finely executed one!” Their host Prince Berwyn enthused, standing at the foot of the bed now and gazing at the almost still form of his young friend. Berwyn turned and lunged with his right arm in the same well practised manner. “Not through the heart, but straight down the throat!” He roared, jumping up from the thrust position with the boundless energy of the young. His rugged but handsome young face flushed at the memory, or perhaps at his own outburst in such sage company. His blond hair and his thick, drooping moustaches seemed to emphasise his ruddy blushes, but his smile remained. Cridas smiled back at the young prince’s antics and nodded his head, his eyes glistening in the firelight as he recalled the heroic effort of Cadwy, not only to pass the private and unprompted test of his courage, but to save his own young life. Moreover, his son and heir had killed the belligerent creature which had been causing so much havoc among Berwyn’s foragers. That beast had tormented the forest crofters, coppicers and char producers in this region for weeks, and once an animal had killed humans it had to be hunted down and slaughtered. ‘For was it not always prudent, an obligation and an honour to do a good deed for a hospitable and a generous host?’ The king reflected thoughtfully, glancing at his young blond and *vassa*/ host.

“The bar went halfway down the beast’s throat!” Berwyn added with pride and even a touch of awe.

Cridas nodded in serious agreement, thinking of this 'bar'; the *boar-guard* which had safeguarded his son's life, and which vital protection his father had not had when he had slain the mighty Gargon those years ago.

This boar guard took the form of a footlong iron crossbar welded below the long, leaf shaped blade of an Albion war spear. This cross guard was hurriedly added by the old blacksmiths when these enraged beasts proved they could, even though fatally impaled, drive themselves onwards down the full length of normal war spears. Pushing themselves suicidally forward down these penetrating shafts without quit, they would gouge and mutilate their killers whilst still in the last throes of their own deaths, and out of a sheer and unflinching malice. Some of the huge and murderous boar which had sprung up in this north-western corner of Prydain had, over time become razor tusked monsters of legend. In the minds of the younger werrin, this ancient land was stalked by thunder hooped Boar Gods and bellowing, murderous creatures of myth. Turned from fable and song over generations into blood curdling tales and spine-chilling horror stories, they are told to terrify younger siblings in the depths of a cold Samhain night, the night of the dead when the deceased walk the earth once more along with all the dead beasts of Lug. The king's reverie was broken suddenly as the heavy oak door to this chamber swung open. The unmistakeable form of the Lady Meleri burst into the room exuding a veritable force of lavender scented lace and colourful silk, silver jewellery and indefatigable energy.

"Who's making all the noise in here?" She breathed, her teeth bared and her blazing eyes sweeping the room.

Brac was sure he saw a wisp of smoke curl from one long nostril, just as Prince Berwyn adroitly performed a sharp, two step retreat behind her.

"Is it you Brac?" Her gimlet eyes fixed him in their piercing gaze, and he stood to attention involuntarily.

"Why is it always me?" He tried to protest with a pained expression but was quickly interrupted.

“Why have you not retired yet, and when are you ever going to grow up, you...silly boy?” She glowered up at him, poking him in the shoulder with the snout of the silver, dog’s head handle of her walking stick. “Go on, all of you. It’s late, so clear off! I have important work to do, and I can’t have you three standing about gawping and talking nonsense! This boy is my responsibility now and I tell you he needs his rest!” She barked at them, and Cridas showed his palms in the age-old gesture of supplication. The king did not even get a chance to utter one sage word however and as expected perhaps from the most senior of these men, as the druiden Lady Meleri was in full and irresistible flow. She fixed her patient’s father and the overlord king of all Albion now in her dread gaze. “If he is ever going to recover enough of his wits to understand any of your meaningless mumblings, the Gods allow, he is going to need every minute of rest possible - now OUT the lot of you!” She demanded, her right arm shooting out and with one bony finger pointing unquestionably at the door. This trio of powerful men moved smartly toward it as none wished to tangle with this resolute and unconquerable matriarch regardless of their lofty positions in life, and especially now she was aroused. Lady Meleri of the ancient House of Damnonia and Honorary Duchess of the kingdom of Albion was truly a force to be reckoned with, apart from being an *adept* of no small repute and coming from a very long a line of *bandurau*. A bandura was one of the ancient and shamanic, female priestesses of Prydein and which are the inspiration to their more modern counterparts; the druidens. The Honourable Ddugesi Meleri, Brif-Druiden of Albion and the Myrun Islands as also rightly named was probably the only person alive in all this land who could speak to the high king, his brother or her princely nephew in such a way. Her undimmed resolution however was tempered by the fact that for all their lives, this grand old lady had been there for them as a loving, supporting and positive influence. She was deeply loved by them all, as she was throughout this growing community, across this land and the wider nation of Albion. Her reputation and fame as an adept of world order and being one of the arch-druidens of Prydein had carried across the channel to Gallia and into the world beyond. This

grand old lady of Albion was widely known as a staunch ally to many but someone you crossed at your absolute peril.

* * * * *

Much later, long after darkness had settled across this peninsula, the shadows had lengthened in the stone passageways, and the sheltered corners of this great walled fortress had become impenetrable. Only the flickering yellow glow of the lanterns and the occasional brazier showed the way for a fleet-footed visitor at large. This tall, seemingly young, obviously female figure in a hooded *birra* flitted from one dark patch of shadow to the next like an assassin. Stepping lightly between the puddles of snoring celebrants, she crossed this dark and deeply shadowed courtyard and vanished through a stout servant's door which had been set into the formidable stonework of the kitchen workhouse. Minutes later this young intruder crept into the royal sick chamber as a nurse, a dark grey hooded shawl thrown over her head and shoulders. This slim, stealthy figure moved towards the bed nervously, her head constantly darting from one dark corner of this big room to another, her gloved right hand gripping the hilt of a long dagger at her waist. This insidious visitor knelt at the side of the bed and finally relinquished her grip on the dagger, picking up the young prince's pale left hand in both her own. She looked carefully at the drawn, bloodless face below the linen bandages on the pillow and gathered herself.

"Be strong Cadwy. Come back to us, as you are much.....loved.....by us all." She breathed, her watery eyes locked tragically to Cadwy's ghostly face, but there was no movement from the prince, apart from the steady, rhythmic rise and fall of his chest. "Come back to *me* my darling." She whispered; all her intense longing clear on her lovely, oval face. Her beautiful green eyes could not hold back the flow for another moment, and the tears broke, to course down her young face and to leave wet trails down both cheeks. Removing the fine leather gloves, this girl bowed her head and kissed the prince's hand, her tears dropping onto their conjoined fingers as she wept.

Long moments had passed, when her head came up sharply and her wet eyes flew open, turning quickly toward the door. She had lost all track of time and was sure she had heard a noise outside the door, and alarm showed clear on her face now. That same alarm propelled her to action, and this imitation nurse quickly darted across the room to stand behind the heavy door as it slowly and ominously swung inwards. Drawing herself into the shrinking, angular space behind this huge door she held her breath, her hand moving back to the dagger without thought. Her heart seemed to be pounding in her throat now, and so loudly, she thought it must be audible to all in the room. Taking a silent breath, she summoned all her strength and resolve to squash the rising feelings of panic that threatened to burst from her trembling body at that frantic moment. She was from good stock however and readied herself for flight as soon as the door began to close again and the quickly approaching moment when she would be discovered. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt anyone, but she also knew that people can be forced to do almost anything at knifepoint. Her heart raced at this shocking proposition.

‘Arglwydd Rhiannon watch over me I beg of you!’ She mouthed silently, looking up toward the stars with her eyes closed and hoping that it was just a real nurse who was entering the chamber, or a slave she could perhaps command or even overwhelm and escape from. The rude glare of reality began to penetrate the gaping cracks in the brittle shield of self-confidence which had brought her thus far, and inside she quailed now as the possible consequences of her rash and reckless actions became stark, immediate and terrifying. ‘Arglwydd Branwen and Brigida protect me!’ she sent a desperate mental plea to her other most worshipped deities, completing the sacred triad, just as the heavy oak door swung ominously toward her. The girl squashed herself deeper into this crevice as a more urgent fear gripped her now, and she was suddenly terrified that the great door would crash into her and crush her ribs for sure. Her hand found her mouth just as the heavy door thumped against its *stop* let from the ceiling above her head. Her now wide open but disbelieving eyes swivelled upwards, and she spotted the one large stone which had been cannily set

in the ceiling above her and which projected downwards, just enough to arrest the great door and stop it from knocking the adjacent wall down over the years.

The girl's eyes were huge now and filled with fear above the long, slender hand that clamped her own mouth shut. Even a casual observer would have noticed the flawless beauty of this hand, with none of the red chaffing marks or calluses evident on the women of the tref's weathered counterparts. Its nails were polished and neatly clipped and with a heavy gold ring on one finger bearing a motto, this formed into the finely worked cygil of a stag's head. The beautiful green eyes were dry now and huge as she dropped her hand finally, her flawless young face revealed as the very picture of apprehensive beauty. Dark auburn curls contrasted with the emerald-green silk lining of her slate grey hooded cape, the precise shade of emerald as her intelligent eyes. *Their* stunning beauty were almost matched by the glittering brilliance of the real emeralds in her ears, but not quite. She was no nurse that much was obvious, and this elegant yet uninvited visitor exhaled slowly and silently then, realising that the door remained unmoving and just an inch from her face. It was not about to be shut just yet either, and hope welled up within her now like the opening petals of a spring flower. Closing her eyes again, she clenched both fists to stand silent and still behind this great timber door, her fingernails digging painfully into her palms as she listened intently to the sounds she could hear in the chamber beyond. Frowning, she concentrated hard and tried to put a picture to each of the myriad sounds, and it became clear soon enough that it was just as she had hoped; that a nurse was changing the water in the jug, setting more sage to the smouldering smudge bowls and generally checking on the prince. This nurse's obvious dislike of swinging the stiff and heavy oak door four times at each visit had saved this young transgressor, for the moment at least. The voice made her open her eyes and stare unfocused at the timber grains, just inches away and blocking all else.

“Goodnight, dear Prince Cadwy. Arglwydd Brigida I beg for your healing touch at this hour! Please bestow upon good Prince Cadwy your blessings and your merciful aid in his recovery I beseech you!” She heard this nurse mutter the familiar and oft used prayer for the sick in a thick, local Damnonian burr. Suddenly, four sausage like fingers with short, grubby fingernails curled around the edge of the door just inches from her right shoulder and began to pull it closed. As the great oak bastion swung shut and that unseen nurse departed, this intruder put a trembling hand to her forehead and breathed a long, tremulous sigh of relief. She had to lean back against the stone wall behind her for support as her legs felt suddenly as weak as willow wands. It was five long minutes until her breathing and her composure had returned somewhere closer to normal, when she stole a last fleeting kiss from the prince and let herself silently from this state sickroom of the ‘old enemy’.

Five minutes later and still unseen, she slipped off into this dark and starless night again like a wraith and not even a dog had barked.



Chapter Two.

Ederus of Galedon was in a foul temper as he tramped down this cold stone stairway, one hand on the wall as it curved downwards to the underground levels of his sprawling dun. His head throbbed from the afternoon mead, and the dank, unwholesome atmosphere of this dungeon only deepened his dark mood. Tall burning torches ringed this cool, stone lined chamber and were set into impressive iron beackets on the surrounding walls. Between these sputtering torches were hung the banners of the House Galedon with the proud cygil of a golden, twelve-pointed rearing stag woven into their blood red backgrounds. These pennants may have been striking in their day but were now faded and grubby, mould and soot spoiled. They hung indolently on these damp stone walls in stark contrast to the new and colourful banners that decorated the outer, frontal battlements of CaerCamelon. The flickering light from these torches threw looming silhouettes across these low dungeon walls as the king moved past them, all heading toward a group of men at the back of this deeply shadowed underground chamber. The stonework to his right wore a thick cloak of dark green moss, and water from the ditch at the other side of this impressive wall leaked through in parts, dribbling down its living green drapery. Ederus drew the fur collar up around his neck and approached the group of men ahead. They drew aside, and to-a-man they bowed deeply, 'Your majesty!' chorused by them all. There revealed before the king was a man chained to the damp stone wall at the back of this chamber. He was pinned to that cold blockwork by iron manacles and had clearly sustained quite a beating as his face was covered in purple welts and bruises. Suspended by his chains, this unfortunate looked semi-conscious and both eyes in his hanging head were immensely swollen, almost closed. Blood was smeared from his nose and across his face, beard and bare torso, and he wore a filthy remnant of the pleated woollen kirt of a Western Islander or an Iweriu tribesman. A

faded tattoo on his right shoulder of a man's red hand confirmed he was one of the latter. This prisoner was an Iweriuan *scot*, a raider belonging to one of the murderous warbands that were suspected of amassing once again on their country's northeastern coast. Rumours were rife that these scots were preparing to raid and plunder Prydein's northwestern coast once more; more importantly this time, Galedon and Ederus' coast. The high king of the Galedonau's spies were talking of a possible Iweriuan alliance with one Brude Bredus, the self-made 'King of the Western Isles'. Ederus had received reports about the swearing of a great oath of undertaking under the stars by these two huge tribes, amid frenzied ritual slaughter and much worship. Sibilant whispers in dangerous, smoke-filled taverns had been heard by Ederus' infamous ghost-warrior spies. Quiet gossip between complicit friends had been overheard by invisible men regarding the swearing of a solemn and a very secret tribal blood oath to take control of all western Galedon, a rugged and storm-tossed coastline to the high north and which had faced these numerous threats for generations.

The long defiant western islanders living in those largely hostile islands and tortured peninsulas formed when the ancient ice world had melted, and the seas rose those millennia ago are a notoriously rebellious breed. The suspected threatened land lay in the extensive territories of Ederus' sworn allies; the honourable and ancient tribe of the Epidiau and their infamous twin island capital fortress of DunAdda. The presumed landing is likely to take place some distance from the great twin island dun of the Epidiau as however wild and undisciplined the western tribes were, they were far from stupid. Ederus and his 'warrior council' thought they may choose Prince Wrad's smaller DunOlwen to besiege, no doubt based on geographic observations and other intelligences of their own spies. If the combined opinion of Ederus' war council was accurate, this would mean their invading force would circumvent the impregnable DunAdda itself and for very good reason. Any assault on DunAdda would merely cause the Epidiau to do what they always do; take to their battlements in the full and justified confidence of prevailing, as that twin fortress has never been

conquered in all its long history. As they love their horses above all else, the Epidiau will not offer them up for injury or slaughter without great cause and are known to be cautious in this regard. Jubilant the Epidiau would no doubt be on their high battlements, yet ready to pour out of their dun if attacked or when called upon to do so by a higher authority, and so any frontal assault on DunAdda was thought doomed to failure. If a purposeful army perhaps landed further south to take the lesser DunOlwen and slay the villagers and communities around it, they could gain much booty and claim many heads. Their larger, longer-term goal however was deemed to be the gaining of a permanent, coastal foothold on the mineral and pasture-rich mainland of northern Prydein, and it had to be denied them. Other, conflicting intelligence suggested that this invading army may land at one of the many bays to the north of DunAdda, and then move to claim a peninsula of adjacent land whose water bound aspects were steep and inaccessible granite cliffs. It was thought they could garrison that peninsula by building defences across the neck of the landward approach, but this had been dismissed as it was thought logistically virtually impossible. So, the consensus was that DunOlwen would be attacked and the bridges over the inlets then destroyed behind them. There, the enemy could consolidate that minor stronghold before any host of large enough proportions could be raised against them. So far however, all this was guesswork. Ederus was not about to let the invasion of Epidia happen with impunity, as he knew an inch given by inaction now would lead to the inevitable mile taken in future by those perennially land greedy Iweriu and Westerners. Many more heads would be lost in the righting of such a great wrong, if, like a suppurating wound it was left to fester. Prudence and long experience demanded that intervention and mitigating action must be most urgently taken, and whilst there was already much known about the planned invasion and much already put in place, the important details which can be the difference between imperative success and unthinkable failure were still yet unknown. Ederus was in possession of many small items of knowledge which were 'butter on a biscuit' and could be done without, but the crucial *where*, *when* and

how many were the three primary and burning questions that remained unanswered. Ederus had some idea of numbers and a vague idea of when this invasion would take place, but he needed the vital intelligence which would tell him *where* more importantly they would make landing from the many bays and inlets in that rugged and tortured coastline. Without this critical information, he faced weeks of tramping about a huge swathe of land still gripped in the freezing talons of this cruel winter, and he and his men would be forced to follow a horrific path of destruction carved by those merciless and predatory men until they could, by luck or design be brought to battle. Ederus needs to know what this suffering man knows, and he needs the information now, as envoys, bird messengers and riders were all awaiting his important military orders. He felt the weight of expectation and responsibility settle about his broad shoulders at that moment and as he looked again without expression at this unfortunate prisoner before him.

“Anything?” The king barked, not taking his eyes from this bloody and dishevelled man before him, and who had been captured, beaten and pinned to this cold stone at his discretion. His question however was directed at the group of men around him.

“Not yet Majesty.” Dorak Eoal spoke for them all then, and this wiry and middle-aged *Feis yr Artaith* approached the king, wringing his hands in apparent nervousness.

King Ederus turned to his ‘Master of Torture’, and he could not quite stop the sneer of distaste twist his upper lip, as he had come to despise this cruel and sadistic creature. He had to admit however that ‘Dorak the Merciless’ had produced excellent results in the past when called upon. Ederus recalled how the man had gloated when he had made him up, installed him as his advisor, interrogator and spy catcher, but his true and inhuman talents had come to the surface a little later. Master Dorak Eoal had become complacent lately however and had overstepped himself, as the more power the man was given the more ambitious his depravity had become, and in Ederus’ considered opinion, complacency always bred

carelessness. Ederus looked coolly at the all-black clothing Master Eoal now wore and who insisted all his underlings and slaves did the same. He stood humble at this moment, wringing his hands in a mock subservience and bowing repeatedly in deference, but Ederus had heard some of the words this vile creature had spoken about him in private. Considering anywhere really *private* in this kingdom had been the fool's first mistake. His second had been the arrogant scorn and mockery of Ederus to a couple of lower tref prostitutes. This creature thought him a fool, and inwardly Ederus longed for the coming moment in time, when he would watch all the arrogance fade from those brown, rat like eyes and see the blood drain from his narrow face at the moment when he saw his own doom put before him. But for now, Ederus had decided he would keep him alive as he was needed yet, but he promised himself that this odious little man's comeuppance would happen soon. Perhaps in response to his fearful scowl, Eoal the cruel looked anxious at that moment and so Ederus made a great effort to hide his acidic animosity towards this spiteful creature, as with the import of this 'national' endeavour, he still needed his services a little longer, forcing a grimace of a smile at least to replace the scowl on his face.

"Master Eoal" King Ederus acknowledged him, eliciting a sinuous and snakelike smile from the man, and the fake ingratiating stopped as his *Feis yr Artaith* stood more erect. Dorak Eoal was a slender man in his fifties thus presented, with a bald pate fringed by grey and closely cropped hair above piercing, cruel eyes. He had the predatory and restless manner of one difficult to appease and was a man who had built a fearsome reputation for merciless and unflinching cruelty, and more; he was known to take great pleasure from his work.

"He has been fasted these two days, but we have only just begun the interrogation this morning my Liege Lord and Master." Eoal bowed again, and Ederus noted this but remained impassive.

"Then please continue." Ederus growled at him and with a cursory nod.

He knew these matters often took time, especially with the warrior class. There was a fine line between unlocking a man and shutting him up for ever, but time was short. Each man's breaking point being in an entirely different place complicated things somewhat, but these blunt, mostly painful and unpleasant methods of learning were best employed by the most adroit judges of the human character, as it is to these individualities that the form and structure of the procedure should be addressed to be most effective. Eoal was a man erudite in these subtle understandings and could in his stark but unique way garner all the information Ederus so urgently needed. These damp and dour chambers, huddled in the depths below the granite heart of CaerCamelon were filled with all the dread instruments of gaining knowledge by unrestrained torture, all belonging to this hulking, restless king. In a lower level stood an enormous rack frame, bigger than any king's bed, and with its ropes and pulleys designed to efficiently separate a person from his limbs, it looked fearsome and well used. The prisoner was freed from his manacles and brought down to this rack again by two of the black-clad Gaoler's men, who had to carry him as he was semi-conscious. The wall beyond this machine-like contraption was hung with pairs of chains and iron manacles in a row, but these were free of other prisoners this day. A brazier spewed heat and sparks into the damp air of this lower level, and this sat alongside a long iron rack filled with a jumble of tall and differing branding irons. Other strange and hazardous looking pieces of equipment hung on these walls, from leg clamps to bone breakers, but this important prisoner was returned to the contraption chosen by his Master Torturer, and which dominated this low chamber, Eoal's *Gwahanwr yr Aelod*; his 'Limb Separator'.

Agony was etched deeply into the eyes and the face of this *scot*, who came to his senses as he was thrown onto the rope netting strung across the timbers of this great machine. The king observed expressionless as his gaolers tightly bound the prisoner's wrists and ankles to the ropes again, just as he was beginning to wake up. The Iweriu were tough enough but eloquent in the *untruths* to Ederus' experience, especially with regard to their charming manoeuvres of the heart, and they are quick to deceive all

but the most observant. To his knowledge, these scotting mercenaries were generally lacking the honourable attributes of honesty and empathy, the latter being the very distillation of human mercy itself in Ederus' considered opinion. The Iweriu were however the most superstitious of people, which he regarded a weakness, and they were known to fear disability far more than death itself, so this huge and terrifying bone cracker and ligament ripper had been deemed the most apposite method of torturing this man.

The prisoner's head was slumped to the side now, his grey curtain of greasy hair lying like fingers across his face. Eoal nodded to an assistant who instantly threw a bucket of brackish water over the spread-eagled figure, and the Iweriuan groaned, his head rolling from side-to-side on the netting. The terror and the wordless plea for mercy was clear and unmistakeable in the man's swollen eyes, and he began to struggle weakly. His long grey hair draped his damaged face, mingling with the equally grey curls of his ragged beard as Eoal's black-clad assistants re-tightened the thick leather straps at each corner, and all was ready. The king nodded to Eoal, whose sparse, bony figure was sprightly and belied its owner's age as the man moved to the head of this contraption, stepping up to an attachment at its head like a big ship's wheel. This was fixed to a large, ratchet-locked roller mounted to the heavy timber headframe and Ederus looked at this rack machine anew, this time taking in all its details, as he had most certainly paid for it. The king watched impassively as the animated Eoal gripped the big, heavily spoked wheel and began to turn it sunwise. The leather, the ropes and the timber creaked, the prisoner's body lifted, and the exhausted but penetrating screaming began again in this dungeon. Ederus had to step back quickly, as a froth of bloody saliva exploded from the man's twisted mouth. The two assistants then pushed a small wooden barrel under the man, positioning it carefully under his lower back. Eoal then released the pawl on the wheel, releasing the tension so the prisoner folded over the barrel with a groan, his head thrashing from side to side still.

Ederus frowned at this invention, watching as Eoal's minions then unhooked the two thick hemp ropes from the top two rollers in their blocks, transferring the looped ropes to a new looking pair of blocks, emerging from lower down in the great timber bulkhead. The attachments of this contraption creaked again then, as Eoal turned the great wheel to the slow clunking of the heavy iron pawl as it kicked over the curved locking teeth in the wheel boss. This was Eoal the Cruel's latest innovation; a little adjustment to his separator, and now the man was racked *downwards* and arched over this barrel, focusing the stress on his lower back, and his screams tore the sweat stinking, foetid air of this dungeon apart. The prisoner thrashed his head, trying to resist the agony but it aided him nothing, as with a savage *clunk* his torturer turned the wheel again. The screams were terrible now, and the body trapped and stretched by these ropes vibrated in agony like a fly caught in a black spider's web. Another *clunk* came from the roller, and the unforgiving steel belly-hoop of the barrel *crunched* into his lumbar spine, causing a wet, sucking and dislocating sound to come from the man's body. The screams then changed in both tone and depth, before then stopping in an instant, as oblivion had obviously saved this man from his blinding agony. The scot's head slumped as did the rest of his body, to slowly complete the bow like arch over the intrusive barrel. Ederus looked slowly up at Eoal then, his bushy eyebrows moving together dangerously. His brow creased and his blue-grey eyes hardened in fury. Eoal was clearly enjoying himself as he released the tension in the ropes, smiling thinly and his ratty eyes glinting.

"At what point do we hear what this man has to say Eoal?" The king snarled, all composure and goodwill evaporating in an instant. "Do you know what it took to bring him here?" He roared, livid now and with a swiftly building rage.

Seeing the terrible anger suffuse the face of his king, Eoal began his ingratiating routine again, bobbing up and down, and Ederus had to fight the overwhelming urge to draw his great sword and cleave him in two

right where he stood with it. Ederus put his hands on his hips to prevent himself and glowered at the cringing man, not wanting to soil his treasured blade with the thin, rancid blood of this noxious creature. Drawing himself up to his most majestic posture and just as Eoal began to spout forth excuses, he turned on his heel and walked away before he weakened and succumbed to his angry inclination to kill the man with his bare hands. Ederus strode purposefully toward the worn steps of the stairway in the gloom ahead.

“If he dies Eoal, I promise you, it will take you *much* longer to do the same.” He spat ominously over his shoulder and stumped up the damp stone stairs without a backward glance.

* * * * *

The neatly dressed handmaiden carefully poured cool goat’s milk from a terracotta jug into a tall and finely made glass of a pretty blue. Her hands shook, and she cursed silently as the milk spilled. Putting the heavy jug down on the worn surface of this huge table, she stared at her trembling fingers for a long moment before clenching them together, breathing heavily and realising that her heart was still racing.

“Come on Lydia pull yourself together, she needs you now more than ever!” She said quietly to herself. Taking a deep breath, she picked up the heavy jug and quietly returned it to the cold store of this enormous kitchen.

Lydia mopped up the spilled milk and put the blue glass on the silver tray along with a plate of oatcakes and butter biscuits before covering it all with a napkin. Wiping her hands down her apron, she picked the tray up and headed for the stone passage that led from these kitchens to the scullery and to the deeply shadowed door at the end. This heavy, iron studded door opened onto the pathway outside which ran between this kitchen and the refectory, both of which were identical and rectangular thatched buildings, large enough to accommodate all the *Sisters* at their preparation and repast. Once outside, the rain was pursued through this

gap by the gusting wind, wetting her face and her hair, but Lydia pulled the hood over her head and pressed on silently. Stepping under the covered walkway which ran the full length of the refectory, she was glad of the shelter and hurried on. The gate at the end of this gallery gave access to the inner courtyard of this island campus and Lydia carefully closed it behind her, still balancing the tray in one hand. This stiff wind funnelled more icy drops of rain from across the Loch to sweep over the wall of this *bangor* and to scour its sandy courtyard, but she ignored it stoically, crossing the square quickly with her small feet soundless on the sparse turf. Lydia battled on against the swirling elements, crossing the menacing shadows thrown up by the braziers in the dark, wind-swept corners of this huge enclosure. Finally, she reached the pathway that led around the eastern corner of this large group of functional buildings, and her heart was still tripping. Past the huddle of the tutors' round houses and the full length of the long and thatched sleeping quarters of the Sisters she trod, head bent against the lash of this wind-borne rain. Lydia took great care to tread lightly and to pass these houses as silently as she could, diligently bowing and offering her respects to the spirit protector of each dwelling as she breathlessly passed them in the darkness. The deeply shadowed and vaulted stone passageway to the main house lay ahead and Lydia steeled herself to enter its gloomy and oppressive entrance, trying to calm herself. Hearing an owl hoot nearby, Lydia's heartbeat rose further from this ill omen, and taking a firm grip on the tray, she swallowed hard and stepped into the dark passage.

"Arglwydd Arianrrhod protect me I beg you!" She recited the common prayer, and at that precise moment, *Diawl* the kitchen cat exploded from the shadows to run shrieking past her trembling legs. Lydia nearly dropped the tray in her terror and could not help the gasp that escaped her pale lips, thinking her heart would burst at the way it was galloping now. Wide-eyed and panting, she hurried onwards toward the deeply shadowed door at the end of this dark and eerie hallway. Clouds passed over the moon. Shadows moved eerily and deepened like the opening wing of one of Lug Ddu's black birds of nightmare, creeping toward her

now like long and dark fingers on the ground, and Lydia fought her panic as she manipulated the bronze latch with the trembling fingers of her left hand. She managed to open this heavy oak door just enough to escape this crawling terror, whilst still doing her balancing act with the tray, and she slipped sideways through the opening, her heart galloping and sweat popping out on her forehead now despite the cold. Relieved, and glad too of the warmth and the yellow, dancing light from the glowing braziers in this entrance chamber, Lydia dropped the latch on the heavy door behind her and took a deep, tremulous breath to steady herself. As her heart slowed and her breath returned, she moved toward the staircase at the far corner of this big, heavily draped antechamber and hurried up this stone stairway, past one landing with its huge, iron-clad and riveted door. Lydia crossed this landing quickly, and the only sounds were the soft *tapping* of her feet on the flags and the quiet *swish* of her apron as she hurried along. Up a short stairway at the end of this upper passage and she was inside the large, rectangular dwelling that dominated this island campus and where the Matriarch of this holy druidic order kept her private lodgings. It was also where the brif-druiden; the venerable Lady Karych of the House Wenyllon would accommodate important visitors, especially *royal* guests or students. This large, three storied and stone-built edifice was the most imposing building in the quadrangle of other purpose-built thatches crowding the centre of this roughly rectangular enclosure, and it was the only one roofed with the very finest but hugely expensive grey slate, brought by ship and ox cart all the way from the northern and mountainous, Decawangly region of the Khumric people. Thatched storehouses, a welcome hall with a dining refectory and the long college building itself stood in this wide inner courtyard whilst the associated workhouses and large kitchens framed it equally. The high, surrounding enclosure wall sprang from each side of the original broch, and the long, thatched sleeping quarters of the druiden sisters of *Côr Ynys Gwyn* made up the entire inner length of the eastern wall. This high, spike topped wall had surrounded and protected this ancient ecclesiastical campus on the main Myrun Island for over four hundred years, and its limewashed, spike

topped blockwork had stoutly stood that long test of time. A few buildings were under construction on two of the other islands in the group of twelve which also graced the sacred surface of Loch Lugh. One large, oval thatch was being built there by a celebrated local gŵyr of Galedon and the other by his druid, but they held no authority here. In fact, those important men had needed the permission of these druidens before they could start building, as this ancient druidic foundation of learning possessed Ynys Myrun itself, the 'white isle' and the largest and southernmost of these rocky and wooded islands. Their charter being the oldest and more senior in more than just years, it gave them ultimate authority over the entire Loch Lugh border region. Ynys Myrun's 'Druidic College for Ladies' sat precisely on the historically and hotly disputed ley aligned border between Galedon and Albion, and it had been founded by AucWyllt more than four centuries ago. He had been the legendary brif-druid, chief alchemist and Lug-sworn necromancer of all Prydein, and that great man had been the 'benadwr' and the founder of the *Bandurau*; this country's infamous druidens. He was a long dead and supremely powerful druid of the very highest world order, and AucWyllt had been the eminent brif-druid of High King Cuneglas ap Marganus Fawr himself. So, in all matters spiritual and religious, the current druiden matrons of Ynys Gwyn College took precedence and held power, even over King Ederus and King Cridas' own arch-druids. Their enviable library of Greek and Latin scrolls and their vast collection of carved, coelbren memory sticks offered ample evidence of their impeachable rights and their hitherto irrefutable authority, should anyone have the temerity to demand them.

A large and main timber gate to the campus' northern approach was set forty *reeds* before the grounds of the grand house, and there was a broad drover's lane that continued north from this impressive entrance, before bending to the left and then skirting around the distant and thickly wooded crown of this long island. That rutted and sandy lane then resumed its northward passage, leading to a number of stock fields, penned for the many sheep and cattle owned by the estate. Further across the deep and sacred waters of Loch Lugh, there lay to the west of

Ynys Myrun and on the mainland a related and supporting community which inhabits the marshy shoreline around the fishing village of Aber Ffruin. Treflan Ffruin lies on the southwestern shore of the Loch, and there are regular ferries launched from those boggy spits of land which lay at the estuary of the minor, tributary river Ffruin daily. The werrin of that lakeside village would come ashore on Ynys Myrun's southern landing for their living, to supply and to service the famous druidical college at its heart and the extended community around it. This fabled group of twelve islands seems to float serenely on the Gods-blessed waters of Loch Lugh, especially on still, summer days when the magical boundary between the living and the dead becomes a surface as flat and as reflective as a *Trehalen* hand mirror. Loch Lugh itself is the largest freshwater lake in all Prydein, and the tapering tip of this broad and tear shaped Loch pushes south through the great spiritual, northern border divide between these two powerful nations as it narrows into afon Lefan. Its sacred water winds its way south to the great DunAlclwyd of the Albionau below, and to where the Lefan makes continuous and everlasting, holy tribute there to the great white Goddess Arglwydd Clwyd herself.

Lydia knew this island campus and this inner broch intimately, and with her heart still banging, she emerged from the head of the stone stairway onto a small landing for what she hoped would be the last time tonight. She strode toward the large door ahead, and grabbing the hooped, wrought-iron handle of this familiar door in her practised fashion, Lydia bumped it open with her left hip and let herself into the room unannounced as was her custom.

"Quickly Lydia!" Her mistress called out, beckoning to her from the bed.

Her lady had changed into her soft linen bedclothes in the time Lydia had been away, and was now in her big bed, sitting upright and with her lovely green eyes shining with excitement. Lydia noticed the silk-lined cape and the pile of dishevelled and muddy riding clothes on the rug in front of the fire and made a mental note to pick them up and clean them *herself* later. Placing the laden silver tray on the double-knitted bedcover, Lydia sat

herself alongside it, once again caught up in her lady's effervescence, and her pulse still raced in a sympathetic rhythm. Princess Eirwen fell on the oatcakes, as she was clearly ravenous from the long and dark, reckless hours of galloping on horseback. She looked flushed and with her cheeks glowing still, but she ate the food like a starving farmhand.

"Did you see him?" Lydia breathed impatiently, and she could not stop herself looking over her shoulder at her own fateful, even treasonous words. The princess wagged fingers at her and mumbled something, but she soon swallowed the food down.

"I did Lydia! My poor darling Cadwy had his head all swathed, and he was unconscious the whole time." She replied morosely, absently trying to dislodge a piece of dried fruit from a tooth with a grubby fingernail. "He looked so pale and vulnerable Lydia; it nearly broke my heart. Oh, I nearly forgot. I almost got caught!" She added casually, picking up another cake from the tray.

Lydia's hand found her own mouth without thought and her eyes flew open.

"Brigida protect us!" She breathed.

Lydia had been in a state of absolute terror all night and had constant, dreadful visions of her mistress being captured in the hated DunAlclwyd, in the old enemy's fortress of all places, and with no Prince Cadwy to help her or to speak for her if the shocking news was to be believed. Lydia had only breathed a long sigh of relief the moment her princess had arrived back at Aber Ffruin and the thatch of her aunt and uncle in muddy riding clothes, sometime long past sunset and in a frightful state. She had flown to her mistress' side, and then Lydia had led her exhausted horse to the large village stables, before draping her mistress in her own shawl and presenting her to the humble abode of her family. Following a brief introduction to her kinfolk and the necessary and polite blessings and counter-blessings to the household, Lydia had grabbed another woollen shawl for herself, looking to her Uncle Idris. He had nodded back in

support, giving her a comforting wink, which had boosted her courage and had rejuvenated her self-confidence. Once the girls had kissed her Aunt Carys in blessing and sincere thanks, they had been ready. Moments later, the three had stooped to emerge from under the low brow of thatch and Lydia's uncle had led the way, smuggling them through the maze of passages the servants and slaves used to get around this sprawling lakeside village. That broad, strong and capable looking Ferryman was bound to aid his Bregedian kin, but Idris had warned his niece long and hard that evening about the kind of trouble the headstrong and the errant children of the wealthy and powerful could land you in, especially the *royal* kind. His wife however had quietly reminded him what they had been like as a young couple, and how bright the fire had burned within them all those years ago. Idris hailed from Coritana in Breged but had relocated north to beautiful Loch Lugh for his military retirement, taking on a dilapidated property left to him by a distant and unknown Galedonian relative. He and Carys had met one night shortly thereafter around a storm-tossed Beltain fire, and they had occupied his quickly refurbished and handsome thatch soon after that. He had been a respected 1st rank, shield wall warrior of the Coritana Vipers and then a respected Galedonian ferryman, and Carys an honest maiden of the local tref. 'Love was all; surely?' Her calm observation earlier had ended with a practiced look that her husband knew only too well. The man had smiled easily, knowing by the experience of those same long years that he was not going to win the argument, and Idris had thrown up his hands in good natured submission. Further submitting himself gracefully to the thankful kisses of his niece, Idris had determined to help her and her absent mistress, when and if she ever turned up. He would assist them both in whatever way he could, even though he had been nervous of the entire undertaking.

Thus committed, Idris had moved effortlessly ahead of the two girls with the balanced gait of a careful predator in this darkness, and which gave insight to the previous and ultimately more perilous military life of Idris the Ferryman. That big and broad man had moved with a dangerous elegance of silent, considered step, and Lydia had been so thankful for his

towering presence and his assured protection those hours ago. A long and wickedly curved skinning knife always sat snugly in its scabbard at his spine, and tonight Idris the Ferryman had also carried a stout *pastwn*; a reed-long cudgel of seasoned holly heart. This he swung in his huge right hand, giving the clear impression that he knew exactly how to wield it. With the two wide eyed girls clinging to each other in his looming shadow, Idris had led them around the lyre shaped enclosures of his neighbours, keeping to the shadows and moving onwards into the village and over the worst parts of this rutted and muddy ground. This stealthy trio crept toward the lake, dodging the rotting piles of waste and excrement but using no light and stepping lightly. They had made good headway down a lane running parallel to the main road through Treflan Ffruin, when a night cloud obscured the starlight from above and the stygian blackness had closed in around them. They were forced to come to a wordless halt until the light improved and they could move on, for fear of blindly bumping into somebody and raising an alarm. Loyal to the core, Lydia had followed the bulky and comforting outline of her uncle ahead and steered her own royal charge through the dung covered pathways, past the ramshackle tavern and the lewd and lurching, drunken locals. They had pressed on quickly toward the loch, around and over the wet grassy tussocks of this shallow estuary and to the expanse of muddy, marshy ground before the expanse of timber wharfing. A long jetty had materialised out of the gloom ahead of them, stretching out twenty reeds or more from the wharf and into the swirling mists above the dark and bottomless waters of this huge lake. Once safely across the uneven ground of the foreshore and over the small harbour causeway, Lydia and her uncle had steered their princess along the wharf and down to the narrow pier, where a number of small three-benched rowing boats had chafed their tethers along both sides. Idris' personal mode of income had bobbed up and down among them on the lively, black and animated waters lapping at those wet timbers, and which this night had reflected the countless stars in their equally black mantle above them.

The rowing boat they had clambered aboard had been constructed in the old style from oaken planks stitched tight together with hazel strapping, but however outdated, the little boat was buoyant and it was sound. Propelled by the powerful, thoughtless strokes of a professional oarsman, the worn and untidy looking craft had shot across the still waters, leaving a shattered but gloriously spangled 'V' in its wake. The voyage had been correspondingly short and uneventful over a loch that was awash with a cold and winking starlight. The rhythmic rowing had caused the two young women to sway back and forth on the rough benches as Idris pulled steadily and with the consummate ease of many year's peaceful practice between the cluster of small islands on this loch. At voyage's end, Idris had carefully eased the small craft against the timbers of Ynys Myrun's jetty without a sound; the largest of these lake bound atolls. Leaping expertly from the lifting bow of the boat, Idris tied off on a handy rail running the length of the white island's wharf. Once he had helped both his charges gain land, they were able to make their way up from the damp, rotting elm timbers of the tiny harbour and across the sandy shore of a small and adjacent beach, avoiding a group of thatches smouldering silently there in the dark. Following the loping trot of Lydia's quietly competent uncle, they followed this well-worn and pale pathway in the starlight, and which led them around a stand of sacred hazels on this dark and brooding island. From there, this sandy and snaking pathway took the trader's southern approach across some uneven ground and which lead up to the tall, whitewashed walls of the college and the deeply shadowed timber and iron, southern gate. There they had paused whilst Lydia had kissed her uncle, who returned it warmly before turning to her charge with an easy smile.

"May the Gods watch over you my lady!" Idris had whispered earnestly with a bow, stooping to kiss the back of Eirwen's hand before he took his leave from both and slipped away without another word.

The girls were left to continue the last twenty reeds to the gate and to make entry without him, as any man found anywhere near this college in

the dark hours could find himself very quickly in dire trouble, as would any unauthorised male in daylight hours. Any reckless fool of a man caught *within* the walls of this all-female druidic college after dusk risked his vital extremities, his life and his very soul. Lydia, clutching her mistress's arm tightly and supporting her stoically had been eternally thankful for the break in the clouds then and the sudden return of clarity, coming from the cold light of the uncountable stars above them.

"Arianrrhod is with us my lady!" She had whispered gamely, and they had both moved up the gentle slope to the tall and iron studded gate. The princess' confidence had returned a little then as she was on familiar ground, and once they had passed soundlessly through the gate and into the compound, they hurried across the courtyard, taking the left fork of the path towards the dominating stone-built house. A few brief but breathless minutes later, Lydia had somehow delivered her princess safely and silently to her bed chamber at the top of this broch, and without any incident or challenge.

"Oh merciful Brigida, I feared you had been caught by the old enemy my lady!" Lydia blurted out from her bedside, evoking her native Goddess again and grabbing her mistress's hand, pressing it thankfully to her cheek.

"I said *almost* Lydia dearest, and no, I wasn't actually discovered, but it was a close-run thing!" The honourable and revered, Princess Regent Eirwen ferch Ederus of the House Galedon said with jubilation, deftly reclaiming her hand; her terror long forgotten. "Oh, but Cadwy looked so helpless and so alone Lydia, it was all I could do not to get in the bed alongside him and hug him to me!" The princess added wistfully, hugging a pillow instead and blowing an exasperated sigh.

Once the tray was cleared to a side table, Lydia returned to her mistress's side and sat with a rapturous, wide-eyed expression throughout the tale as her princess gave her a blow-by-blow account of her wild and utterly reckless evening.

* * * * *

King Ederus sat in his nightshirt on the side of his great bed of beautifully carved oak, with his fat and bare toes dangling just short of the lambswool floor rug. This magnificent bedframe was draped with stunning tapestries and vibrant woollen drapery, whilst the bed itself was strewn with furs and soft silk cushions. He held his aching head in both hands from the comfort of this luxurious four-poster as a buxom young woman gathered her clothing from around this sumptuously furnished chamber. Hardly bothering to watch her attempt to dress, or to at least achieve some modicum of decency before stumbling out through a small door to the long passageway outside and which eventually led to the servant's quarters, Ederus sat blearily amid a swirl of vivid silks and crumpled white linen, trying to wake himself up. A cock crowed lustily from somewhere in this hilltop caer as that door closed, and weak sunlight tried hard to penetrate the fabric of the window drapes facing him, pricking at his bloodshot eyes. All Ederus wanted to do was fall backwards to the warm linen sheets and the comforting silk drapes and go back to sleep, but there was an important meeting with his gŵyrd to oversee later regarding Albion movements, along with other recent occurrences on their southernmost border and elsewhere in the world. He had no choice but to attend these important meetings, not least as he had ordered them in the first place and by royal decree no less.

"Oh, to be a king!" He chortled to himself, and Ederus rose wearily to wash his hands and face in a nearby basin. The main oak and iron door to his bedchamber opened then with a dry squeak as Ederus dried his face and neck with a linen cloth, and Erran his personal squire came in, closing the heavy door behind him.

"Good morning your majesty! Did you sleep well?"

Erran's perpetual high spirits were hard to bear some mornings, and Ederus just grunted, giving a brief nod in response to the usual deep and formal bow offered each dawn by his earnest young *arwein*. Erran placed a clay dish with the washed burdock leaf on the king's bedside table

without a word, and then this smart young man proceeded to go through Ederus' wardrobes and cupboards, gathering the clothes and accoutrements his king would require for this demanding day ahead.

Once dressed, the king was chewing methodically on the green for his headache and making ready to attend the first gathering of this day when he was interrupted once again, and this time by one of his best and most secret spies. He was one of very few men in this realm who could boldly march up the steep ramp and enter the capital of Galedon; CaerCamelon and to walk through the guard houses unquestioned. This tall and broad-shouldered warrior was one of an even smaller group of highly trusted people who could gain instant entry to the king's inner keep, likewise undisputed. Moreover, this particularly impressive looking man was almost alone in his authority to pass unchallenged between the two personal guards outside, and to let himself through the squeaky door to the king's private bed chamber without delay or hindrance. This huge soldier silently took a position to one side of the great hearth in this big room, awaiting his lord's pleasure.

When he was ready, Ederus waved the man over and observed closely as he moved toward him with the easy, balanced gait of a true predator. Apart from his unnerving size, everything about this man spoke of his athletic prowess and his unshakeable self-confidence in all things. The fearlessness and the physical strength of this huge soldier were startling as he approached, and even as Ederus had known this colossus since he was a boy, his nearness always made his pulse quicken. This tall and muscular man was a battle seasoned veteran and the leader of his *Ghost-Warriors*. This was a man of extraordinary ability and easily the best tracker and silent killer Ederus had ever employed, but his ghost-warriors were so much more than mere stalking assassins. This towering titan carefully took one knee on the rug at his feet, and looking up, he took the hand Ederus offered. He reverentially kissed the large, golden ring of state on the king's finger with its deeply and beautifully carved stag, the planes of which had softened over the years of adoration.

"I came as soon as I was able majesty, and I have been riding for three weeks. I have stopped to speak to all our people on the list as you bade me, and I have urgent news from the noble courts of both Albion and Breged. I also carry grave news of great portent from King Caswallawn's royal court in the south, and further afield lord, from our agents in Alesia and from our spies across the rest of Gallia." This man declared earnestly, and at each word, this fearsome warrior's talisman snarled and screamed soundlessly from his powerful throat. This infamous mark of a ghost-warrior took the form of a sacred blue design, tattooed in oak gall ink over the man's prominent Adam's apple. It was the outline of the skull of a roaring, sabre-toothed cat of ancient legend, and it marked this man out as one of the most accomplished killers ever to stalk this earth. Ederus clasped the thick, outstretched arm with both hands and he raised the man.

"Stand Olwydd Hîr! You are my most trusted servant and I bless you for your diligence, as my meeting with both the Bregedian and Albion ambassadors are set for later this morning, so please tell me everything. One moment. Erran!" The king ended with a shout, and his young aide came running back. "Fetch food and ale for our guest." The king demanded with a bushy, arched eyebrow, and Erran nodded confidently in return before racing for the other door to the servant and slave's quarters. The king turned back to his visitor and nodded, giving him leave to begin and waving him to a chair near the fire. Ederus picked up one of the long fireirons and absently poked about in the hearth, making the fire flare and crackle but yield no further warmth. As his guest eased his obviously bruised backside onto the luxurious softness of a large and well stuffed cushion, Ederus observed him closely again now as he began his report. Olwydd Hîr was a *Nêr*; a tribal chieftain, and he made the big oak chair he sat on look tiny. He was dressed in the 'winter-heather' weave of woollen bracs, and a long, hooded mantle of the same irregularly patterned cloth draped his enormous shoulders. This unusual cloth was coloured in the seasonal browns, beiges and purple hues of the surrounding mountains and hills, giving a superb method of concealment when needed. Ederus'

ghost-warriors employed a number of these hooded outfits, each woven by their women in canny, irregular patterns and in the numerous mixes of camouflage colours designed to suit many different terrains, and all four seasons. These colours and hues were often extracted from the particular lichens and flora of these regions in advance, adding to the vision bending, colour blending abilities of this extraordinary cloth their women wove. White sheepskin was used when snow was on the ground, and these highly developed, double knitted garments played a big part in their legendary abilities of concealment, stealth and even invisibility. The heavy, somewhat magical looking mantle this impressive man wore today was pinned by a large silver brooch of fine quality, and it bore a snarling image of the roaring sabre-toothed cat of his infamous brotherhood. The embossed, solid silver cap of this finely cast brooch with its screaming cat skull could be removed revealing just a plain brooch of common design underneath, but it was currently on display and worn with great pride.

“Overseas news first Olwydd, then we’ll discuss our southern neighbours.” Ederus suggested, still stirring the flames absently. Erran returned at that moment and with a wicker basket of food and a log of foaming beer to wash it down with. “Eat first Olwydd.” Ederus bade the warrior, waving Erran forward. “I’ll finish dressing, then we can talk properly.” He added, smiling as the huge man fell on the food like a starving puppy.

An hour later, both men were headed for the subterranean dungeons beneath CaerCamelon, Ederus leading the way down these familiar and worn stone steps, completely used to seeing men jump when he appeared, and today was no exception. The overweight and scruffy individual whose Gaoler’s shift it was leapt to his feet from the three-legged stool he had been dozing on.

“Yourr, M-majesty!” He stammered, dislodging small crumbs of stale bread from his untidy beard.

Ederus ignored him, and hardly paused as he continued toward the stout oak door which led to the prisoner cells. The fat Gaoler had to move smartly to overtake the king, and he opened the barred gate to the

cellblock for him to pass into the long and gloomy passageway beyond just in time.

“The scot!” Ederus demanded abruptly, preoccupied with so much recent knowledge, and the crucial decisions he was still formulating in the back of his busy mind. The Gaoler, whose rancid, greasy smell filled this antechamber obeyed instantly, unlocking a second gate and moving along the long stone corridor beyond it in his shuffling gait, rattling his ring of keys. This corridor was lined on the right hand with small, gated and windowless cells of bare, damp stone, and they made an abysmal scene. A few were occupied, and there were a few handfuls of straw strewn about these cell floors, but this was mostly old and filthy. This large, odious man with the keys stopped at the penultimate wrought iron gate, unlocked it and opened it wide before stepping aside without a word. The stench from this cell made the fat man smell positively floral in comparison, and Ederus’ top lip curled in distaste.

“Leave us.” Ederus commanded flatly, and the Gaoler shuffled off without pause.

Nêr Olwydd seemed completely immune to the miasma from the doorway. His face remained impassive, so did his demeanour as he leaned on the steel gate frame and surveyed the filthy, broken creature on the floor of this cell, and who had recently clearly fouled himself.

“No! No more for Dub’s sake!” Flat on his back on these cold and filthy flagstones, the prisoner groaned this in his thick accent and on hearing their voices. The man’s head turned, and looking up, his haunted and terrified eyes found those of the king.

“I yield once more great king! I will talk again lord! I surrender for Dub’s sake!” The prisoner’s face contorted and twisted in agony at this grunted but clearly desperate declaration, his body tensing as a jolt of pain assaulted him. He seemed to conquer it to some extent, and the focus returned to his eyes. “I will tell all great King Ederus ap Ewin once more, but to you only.” He croaked. His eyes flared with a renewed fear then, as

the insidious voice of Master Eoal suddenly carried clearly down to the cellblock and this stone cell, signalling his return. A desperate look now took hold of this prisoner's features. "Lord protect me from that monster as he has sworn to murder me!" He pleaded of Ederus; his eyes stark with the belief. "I will reveal all *again* lord, as I have already told your creature many hours past, but only if you keep him away and that....that separator!" He groaned again in terror and pain.

"Who is foolish enough to enter my domain without my knowledge?" The sly question from Eoal's mouth carried to the men in this cell, and the threat within those words were unmistakeable. Ederus' face had darkened at the prisoner's words, but now his lip curled again as his mood began to match his grimace. He stepped out of the cell backwards, just as Master Eoal strode arrogantly through the cellblock entrance and into this long and cold corridor.

"That would be me Eoal." Ederus growled menacingly, seeing the man brought up short and the fear flare on those ratty features. Eoal's cunning face showed surprise for but a moment, and his eyes were shrouded and glittering as he bowed deeply.

"Your royal Majesty!" Eoal acknowledged before standing upright once more, and with a cool, relaxed look now back on his bony face.

"You were saying Master Eoal. Who's domain?" Ederus' anger simmered just below the surface, adding gravel to his words, and the dangerous lights still danced in his hard eyes.

"I meant no insult Great King Ederus ap Ewin ap Ewin ap Durstus Fawr!" The man honoured his full name, bowing again deeply, but it sounded like an insult now to Ederus' ears. "Your royal and most generous majesty, I meant only these base offices in jest." Eoal told him, his hands held open submissively. "The domain is yours my liege lord, from horizon to horizon." Eoal spoke smoothly, like lamp oil running off a wet blade stone, and his calm arrogance pricked Ederus' gall, as it always seemed to of late. He kept his temper in check however, as it was clear by Eoal's

continued complacency that he had no idea of the knowledge Ederus had received concerning him. He looked the man up and down for a long moment before commenting.

“You are dismissed from your duties for the rest of the day Eoal, but you will remain in the caer.” Ederus commanded him easily and turned back to Olwydd in the cell doorway, adding his physical dismissal to the verbal. It was a long moment before the sound of Eoal’s light footsteps began, before then swiftly fading as he left the gaolhouse, and Ederus would have given a gold coin to have seen Eoal’s face in that pause and when he was dismissed so curtly. He thought to ask Olwydd for a moment, but changed his mind, as on sudden reflection it was unseemly. Ederus stepped back into this dank and reeking dungeon cell and surveyed this prisoner again, who remained supine on these cold flags, but his eyes were more alert now, and although clearly racked with pain still, more of this previous man’s spirit had returned.

“Thank the Gods! I told your master torturer all I know last night great Rhi, but my surrender caused no pause nor let in his soul piercing administrations, and I lie before you now a broken man with a separated spine. I am thus killed from the waist down lord, so I have nothing left to hope for great king and even less to live for.” This scot growled in his throaty burr, and with enough spirit left in his shattered body to make complaint and demonstrate some small if meaningless resistance. This information angered Ederus immensely, and his neck flushed dangerously, causing him to clench his fists in the realisation that this business could have been concluded hours ago, and the essential and urgent military correspondence could have been dispatched in much more generous circumstance. Worse, Eoal’s continued torture had almost destroyed this man and could easily have robbed him of the vital intelligence he so vigorously sought, scuppering some already made plans and putting countless numbers of his subjects in dire jeopardy. As it was, Eoal had done nothing but caused this man further pain for his own gratification, knowing that it was the *threat* of permanent disability that frightened

these men above all else. Eoal had gone much further than that, effectively crippling this prisoner, igniting the fire of injustice and resistance within him and ultimately making this task more difficult. The accusation of imminent murder he took with a large pinch of salt as the man's life had certainly been placed in the hands of his master torturer, but Eoal's reckless incompetence had almost killed this man before any real interrogation could be carried out, that much was indeed true. Inwardly, Ederus was incandescent with rage, and he made the mental decision right then to seal the fate of 'Eoal the stupid', having a sudden flash of inspiration in that regard. Ederus saw in his mind's eye at that moment and somewhere far below him the dark Lord Lug opening one red and baleful eye at this ethereal news and smiling wickedly.

"You need fear Eoal the cruel no more scot, if you speak plain." Ederus reassured this prisoner gruffly, scowling as he swallowed his anger down like a mouthful of bitter bile. He took a brief moment to compose himself before continuing with a thoughtful expression, clearly forming his words as he spoke. "It is not my custom to torture without cause scot. However, I will not offer any apology as I must have the information that you hold and which I need by whatever means, as the many lives of my combrogi hang in the balance of that same hard knowledge. I will however make apology for the abuses of Master Dorak Eoal, as he is my man, at least he is for the rest of this day. Eoal the cruel will pay for his abuses to you scot and for all his other indiscretions, of that I can assure you, but now you *must*, and you *will* tell me all. If I am satisfied with your answers, I will have you watered and fed, and I will have a healer sent down to you with milk of the poppy to ease your pains. But, if you tell an untruth, mislead me or withhold something in any way whatsoever, this man here will know in an instant as he is a Lug-sworn adept of the highest order. He will perceive all your deceitful thoughts and all those truths which are not forthcoming. In this regard he cannot be deflected nor challenged, and it is why he is present." Ederus lied glibly, pleased at the response, as those pain filled eyes regarded the huge-framed man in the doorway anew and with a respect that approached one of awe rather than disbelief. It was

clear to all the world that the enormous man leaning nonchalantly against the door frame with the thick, drooping moustaches was a ghost-warrior of the Caledonau, from the clothes of concealment to the blue needle ink drawing at his throat. His infamous skull motto of a sabre-toothed cat screamed in open mouthed ferocity at the world, the owner's prominent Adam's apple giving form and movement to the terrifying charm. It confirmed beyond any doubt this warrior's elite class, but to be a Lug-sworn adept who can probe the mind of another as well? These impossibly mutual attributes in one huge man seemed to overwhelm the prisoner then, and he quickly averted his eyes from the steely gaze of this dread, magical warrior that towered over him from the doorway. Since his cunning capture four nights ago, Druich the scot had sought the means whereby he could affect an escape or kill himself by whichever means presented itself. In the course of the following days of travelling he had come to realise that neither goal was achievable, as those four soldiers of Caledon who had kidnapped him were extremely well drilled, and to a man knew precisely what they were about. Those master spy catchers of the Caledonau; their infamous *ghost-warriors* had executed his abduction from the high, craggy outpost of his watch in moments and with the consummate ease of long practice. Appearing suddenly like ghosts from the dark trees around him, in a flash he was sitting stunned on the ground. As one ghostly attacker secured his wrists and gagged him, another took his filthy woollen mantle along with the stolen brooch that secured it. These were thrown to a comrade without a word, and the two other men in this silent group began to dress a fresh corpse they had brought with them in Druich's clothing. With a few swings, those two ghost-warriors had hurled their cadaver over the rocky head of those cliffs, to crash into the boulder strewn floor of the chasm below. An empty whiskey pot and Druich's sword and dirk were sent after the body, and he had been forced then to dress in filthy sackcloth, feeling blessed to be alive but left in no doubt as to their motives. A little more than an hour later, the five men had trotted past that harrowing scene on the rocky ground in silence, and their gazes had been inexorably drawn to the

smashed body folded backwards over a great boulder, and it had burst apart like an overripe damson. The skull was ruined, topless and empty, as the red-streaked and yellowish contents had been dashed to the earth below it. What remained of the flattened head still cast an occasional drip of thickening blood, adding to the congealing mess below it of brain splatter and shards of broken pottery. What had once served as the man's face was now a crumpled, unrecognisable mess, and they had passed that gory scene quickly, thankful to escape the sickly stench of cold spilled guts. Heading downhill toward the leaden sea, sitting in the vee of the valley mouth and glinting in welcoming allure ahead they had hurried on. The distant bay had been suddenly lit up by a glorious moon as it sailed boldly from behind a cloud, slashing a rippling and living sword of pale-yellow light across the dancing waters of the eastern Iweriuan Sea, and Druich had been effectively and soundlessly kidnapped under its cold and impersonal glow. Within another hour, these capable warriors had raised the simple, square sail on the small fishing boat they had arrived in, and Druich had been trussed, gagged and thrown into the deep belly of that old coastal vessel. Covered with a large and reeking fishing net, he had felt the canvas sail catch the wind from the stinking bilges, and that boat had heeled sharply as it connected properly with the westerly before they turned to the northeast and headed for Caledon. Those Caledonian ghost-warriors had remained exceptionally focused and remained wordless for the hours spent at sea, clearly communicating with only brief nods and unseen signals. During the long hours in that little boat and subsequently in an enemy saddle, and which long slog had brought him to this enemy dun, no such opportunity to gain suicide or freedom had presented itself. None would either, now that he was broken and incarcerated in the black heart of this great caer's infamous keep. Druich accepted this unfortunate situation with the pragmatism of the mercenary, as he had no real alternative. With an equally pragmatic shrug, Druich realised that the cunning of the Caledon assassins had been bent on causing no alarm to his superiors and thereby averting any change in their plans. By the same token, their ghostlike efficiency had given rise to another realisation, that

no slur or accusation of treason could attach to his name in Hibernia and put his family in peril from anything he could reveal here. He was assumed dead, and his shattered body had been burned by now of that he was certain, so he had nothing more to lose. The gruff rumble of King Ederus' words hauled Druich back to this harsh and painful present.

"Should you be foolish enough to attempt any subterfuge scot, my man will know immediately, and from that moment you will be Eoal the cruel's thing of amusement." Ederus pronounced gravely, drawing the man's terrified gaze back up to him. "I have known him to keep a man alive for over three weeks, not a fate to be contemplated easily." He qualified ominously, fixing the prisoner again with a hard gaze. This hopeless man looked up forlornly from Ederus to Olwydd and back, and then he nodded finally, all hope of resistance gone. His shoulders sagged, and that small sign of relaxation and submission was not lost on either interrogator, as regardless of his offer it looked as if the period of learning had finally arrived. The *scot* was as good as his word, and he went on to admit that the extempore western alliance was indeed real and bent on violent conquest of Ederus' lands. With one huge and painful breath, this broken prisoner started at the beginning.

His story began the previous Lughnas and with the celebrated visit of one Brude Bredus, the self-proclaimed 'King of the Western Isles' to Druich's Liege Lord; Rui-Ri Conair Môr of the House Dedad. This historic meeting had taken place at his regional king's great and famous fortress of DunSandaél on the river Bhanna, situated in the wild north-eastern territories of Hibernia. This intelligence had given Ederus a focus for his outrage and it galvanised him. The initiator and designer of this proposed invasion now had a name, and Ederus promised himself silently that he would personally count the days Brude Bredus, the self-styled king of the Western Isles had remaining on this earth. One infamous Conair Môr would also feel his wrath for this attempted invasion.

This prisoner proceeded to tell all that he knew, and as he was a captain and tasked with leading the scots of his village in the *lonradh*; an oath-

sworn undertaking to their kings and their Gods, he had been party to most of the planning details which he gave up willingly now. Much was left to fate once they made landing on Galedon's coast, as none needed instruction on how to *scot*; to bring sudden death and merciless chaos to the inhabitants, it was what they did. However, the crucial, all-important details of location, date and tide were eventually given up in a series of pain filled gasps by this broken man. Ederus persisted, asking him incisive questions abruptly, and referring back to details revealed earlier in the interrogation in an attempt to catch the man out, but he failed in the endeavour. The questioning and confirmations were coming to an end, and now Ederus was convinced that this crippled warrior had told him the truth in all things, keeping his word of honour and confirming much of his own and his war council's guesswork.

"You have done well scot. How are you called?" Ederus asked him seriously.

"I am known as Druich mac Druad of Cloyfin great lord." The Iweriuan replied from the filthy straw of his cell and with the exhausted tone of the truly vanquished, but a glimmer of lost pride endured in the rough brogue as he gave up his family name, and this was mirrored in his pain shrouded eyes.

"You have kept your bargain and proved the worth of your word and your name Druich, and now I must keep mine. I will send for a healer this minute." Ederus nodded, finally feeling some empathy for this shattered man.

"Ah, to what end great Rhi?" Druich blurted out with a painful sigh. "For I am truly finished in this world!" He grumbled in despair, but he seemed to relent and took another deep breath. "But I am honoured to have known such an honest and forthright king as you lord, and I relieve you of all promise, for I am content that the shame of my supplication will not fly like the black crow of accusation to my homeland." His eyes were shrewd at this revelation, and Druich levered himself up onto one elbow with a grimace and looked Ederus in the eye. "I am half killed already good King

Ederus, and so all that I can ask is that I die a clean death and by the hand of a high king no less!" His eyes glittered at this request, but he tore them from Ederus' gaze and hung his head at his own dour words. "There is only one finer way to cross the bridge of swords and to enter the underworld lord, but that way is lost to me, so I will take what mercy I can from your majesty." His shoulders slumped as he fell back to the floor, his long and ragged grey hair mingling with the filthy straw under him, and he looked utterly defeated at that moment. This impassioned and forlorn plea struck a chord in Ederus, and it spoke of this man's character and of his value when he had been whole and free. His abject suffering added a stab of culpability to this flare of compassion Ederus felt as he looked down on him and his broken body, and he cursed himself silently, shaking his head.

"Give me your blade Olwydd." Ederus requested with a grimace, proffering his hand and the warrior in the doorway obeyed instantly, placing the sharkskin grip of his long, wickedly sharp killing blade in the outstretched hand without question. "Step on his right arm Olwydd but not to injure, just to control." Ederus added, taking pleasure in the question that crossed the warrior's face, but Olwydd complied equally swiftly, placing his heavily booted foot squarely on the prisoner's right forearm, effectively but carefully trapping it to the filthy stone flags under him. Ederus bent to the broken man and crouched then, showing him the blade, and then he carefully placed the rough grip of the ghost-warrior's dagger in the man's immobilised hand. The gesture's meaning permeated the haze of agony this scot was immersed in, and their eyes met again.

"Great king you do me much honour! The honourable death of Isarno is something I had thought lost to me!" The man gasped in wonder, referring to the noble warrior's death that all men sought; to be dispatched to the Underworld with an iron weapon in hand, and apart from having your own family sword gripped in hand, this was surely the finest end any man could desire, but at the hand of such a king? The man smiled then through his pain, and unseen, Ederus casually drew his own bejewelled dagger from the back of his belt. As the tears of overwhelming gratitude rolled

down the dirty face of this warrior scot, Ederus pushed his razor-sharp blade between the man's ribs and upwards to meet his heart. He felt the resistance of that great pounding muscle for one tremulous beat and tension snap the man's body into a vibrating rictus, but the honed blade slid home inexorably. Druich twitched convulsively twice and gasped before his body relaxed completely and he died. His spirit departed the husk and began its journey down, down to the dark and semi-permanent house of Lug, and Ederus was compelled to shake his head once more. Careful to slide the blade out without soiling his own clothing, Ederus wiped his dagger on the dead man's filthy kirt, and then retrieved the ghost warrior's killing blade from the corpse's clawed fingers. He stood, handing Olwydd back his loaned weapon with a nod, just as a large pool of blood spread across the flagstones and around his booted feet. It mixed with the filthy straw and the man's other evacuations, and the rank metallic smell of fresh blood dominated all others now, filling this small cell.

"He was a brave man, for a scot." Olwydd said drily from the doorway, expressionless.

Ederus gave him a wry grin at the half-compliment, half-insult, before moving past him and heading for the passageway.

"Come, there is much still to do!" Ederus grunted, and the huge ghost-warrior fell in behind him, but he took the opportunity to speak up as they climbed the stairs to the upper reception chambers.

"Would you like me to deal with Eoal for you lord king?" Olwydd offered, and with more than a little enthusiasm in his deep, musical voice.

"No Olwydd thank you, I have another fate planned for that creature!" Ederus replied darkly over his shoulder, and Nêr Olwydd shrugged his impressive moustaches.

"There is another matter majesty, for your ears alone." Olwydd ventured from behind him.

Ederus turned his head at this and seeing a look of such trepidation on Olwydd's face, it worried him. He paused for a moment on these dished and cold steps, seeming to mentally shuffle the order of his important list of tasks ahead before forging upwards once more.

"Come, we'll talk in here." Ederus led them through an open door to a long oak bench, set against the wall at the back of a large but empty furnished chamber. He sat, and he shared this bench with his most trusted agent, getting a strange feeling about this added discourse and at the man's obvious discomfort. "Be at your ease Nêr Olwydd and speak freely, as there is no man I trust more than you." Ederus reassured him in a friendly tone, and then he held his peace as Olwydd cleared his throat nervously beside him.

"I had to pass by Ynys Myrun on my way here from Albion, for as you know lord, the swiftest route is up through the western pass of Loch Lugh and past the sanctuary of the Myrun Islands." Olwydd told him this wearily and with the convincing tone of recent and personal experience, whilst easing his aching posterior onto this seat in subconscious confirmation. "I stopped and changed horses in the village of Aber Ffruin, and the stabler there spoke to me in confidence about a certain well known *royal* horse. I then spoke to an elder of the village, and following swift but clandestine enquiry, he confirmed the same horse's recent night-time movements and that of its young female rider." Olwydd paused demurely here, clearing his throat and lowering his gaze.

Alongside him, Ederus looked troubled at these quietly spoken words.

"I'm not sure that I quite understand you Olwydd, royal horse, female rider! What are you trying to tell me?" He blurted out, concern and confusion clear on his bearded face, and he stood up now, not exactly knowing why.

"I have some disturbing news, or speculation really your majesty, but I must convey to you what I was told about the Princess Eirwen." Olwydd replied quietly, his eyes still lowered.

“My daughter Eirwen?” The king looked down at him in surprise, and Olwydd nodded slowly up at him, but with convincing gravitas.

Ederus sat down next to him again heavily. “Please continue Olwydd.” He said gruffly, massaging his aching right knee and preparing himself for the worst.



Chapter Three.

In the rosy glimmer of this cold, predawn morning, these troops silently took up position at the western fringes of this great forest of Galedon, not two-hundred *reeds* from the surf crashing unseen onto the nearby shoreline. The beach was hidden yet by the tenacious lord of the night who still clung to power here, and he was aided by the floating banks of ghostly sea mist that rolled in relentlessly. Weapons and kit had been secured and muffled, as was everything else they carried. Each warrior had secured the equipment of his battle brother, and the same boon was returned wordlessly so that these huge and determined soldiers could move almost silently through this densely wooded forest at a trot, something they could do all day long. These elite warriors could cover astounding distances in almost unbelievable times, as they had trained at endurance hill running since childhood, even in the most challenging conditions of their northernmost, ice locked territory. These were the infamous *Gadwyr* of the allied northern tribes, warriors who fought under no banner even though they had an honoured one, as the *Gadwyr* consider they need no introduction. Introductions they would carry out themselves if demanded of them, usually only once and in their own unique and violent way. These indefatigable and legendary warriors were the sharp point of Ederus' lance in this campaign, as only these long limbed and barrel-chested men could match the pace and range of the mounted officers and his cavalry. It was only the sterling work and the quiet, unobserved successes of his ghost-warrior led network of spies which had given Ederus forewarning of this invasion, allowing him just enough time to respond, as long as it had been a fast response. Accordingly, he had sent bird messages of invitation to these infamous northern warriors who were a very recent addition to his alliance, but they had answered his call to arms, nonetheless, and the mighty *Gadwyr* had come.

The monstrous warriors crouching among these trees fought with a matched pair of enormous double edged battle axes, both blades of which were honed to an edge a man could shave with. They wore a jointed and heavy bronze amulet around each massive forearm which cupped the elbow and served as their shields, and many of these bore the cuts and scrapes of countless previous battles. They had learned to master numerous techniques of twirling these pairs of deadly axes to great and horrific effect, and once they started on one of their many battle forms, they were incredibly hard to bring down. A sharp axe blade would suddenly shoot forward, and another head would leap from the shoulders of yet another vanquished warrior. With good pace management of all the horses in the host, these unique warriors could run alongside them all day long, through forests and swamps, up and down hill, and still engage in the most terrible battle slaughter at the end of it. The Gadwyr's stamina is unequalled, and this glorious new vanguard of Galedon crouched now among the tangled undergrowth, breathing deeply and evenly and as intensely alive as the packs of war hounds they had left far behind. They eagerly awaited the clarion call to arms as one, with all their hard, pale and glittering eyes attempting to penetrate the swirling mists at the unseen shoreline ahead. The bleak northern territories these Gadwyr hail from lie just north of the lands of the Cornafau Ddu, the House which leads a smaller alliance of their tribes known as the 'Northern Tribal Alliance' by the people of Galedon and across Prydein. The hardy people who populate that unyielding land across the northernmost region of Prydein itself, however, call it their *Highland Tribal Alliance*. The small village farms, brochs, crannogs and low, stone-built thatches in that territory are shared by a number of disparate tribes, some being the very last members of their families surviving from a time long ago, when the land was cleared of almost all living things and by the most terrible era of *PenAgr*. One or two tribes had been eliminated entirely from this region in that ancient, territory-wide bloodletting, but the almost primordial Caereni, Caernonau and Creuonau tribes still cling to the hills behind the storm chased western coastline. The Decantiau, the Smertau and the

Lugy families, who were likewise huge and powerful tribes at their zenith now eke out a precarious existence on the eastern, rockier region, which is also prone to great storms and mountains of snow *every* long winter. All these surviving, much-reduced families allied themselves to the dominant tribe in that region; the Cornafau Ddu, the warriors of the *battle-axe & black war-horn*. They are one side of a vast and ancient, triadic tribe who occupy the very northernmost, eastern quadrant of Galedon at their fearsome harbour fortress of DunPabwyr. That palisaded, coastal fortress which overlooks and protects their port of the same name, eternally faces the freezing, north-eastern waters of Arglwydd Linn Morwyl. Those vassal, highland tribes ruled by the Cornafau Ddu supply the gŵyrd of Ederus' alliance with many skilled and fearless spearmen, but these huge and red haired, heavily freckled and Gods-blessed warriors of the Gadwyr are a different breed altogether, being an elite and independent brotherhood and the very best warriors that highland region and this whole country produces. The much-feared Gadwyr have never invaded Albion to the south; Galedon's 'old enemy', as they had always been ferociously independent of, and had never allied with the federation. No force on this earth could compel these warriors to do anything against their inviolate will or their unshakeable beliefs, and so they had always remained outside of greater Galedon and the federation's control. It was only the winter before this one when Ederus had finally managed to achieve a breakthrough. Groch Fawr; the wild and seemingly immovable leader of these amazing warriors had been killed in battle on some foreign mercenary sojourn and his body never recovered. Brith Fawr had then taken the chieftain's huge bronze armlets and in the age-old way, by vanquishing his three opponents one-at-a-time and in the traditional back-to-back duel challenge in the great stone hall of DunTarwddu. Once he had taken the seat of power in that great hall to thunderous applause, Brith had gone on to prove himself a very different man to his predecessor. The following year, Chieftain Brith had allowed the king of Galedon's emissaries into DunTarwddu for the first time, and over the following six months, Ederus had been able to include these valiant and

professional warriors into his federation and this northern alliance. Ederus had sworn to uphold their ancient independence and their credos, and that he would make no 'political' demands of them over and above the defence of his greater realm, and so, with their exclusive inclusion, his army had been immeasurably enhanced. The almost mythical Gadwyr had finally become part of greater Galedon with an honoured House and a cygil of their own, and although no sane person would ever whisper the word *vassa/* within earshot of any of them, their infamous chieftain Brith Fawr became a Galedonian *nêr* in some ceremony. Every one of these huge framed, hale and hearty men had been brought up in their legendary brotherhood since childhood and were born to the seven tribes of those cold northern extremes alone. Uncommon, but instantly identified at birth, these large limbed and powerful, red haired babies were Gods-sworn to the brotherhood from that traumatic first moment. Once they reached the age of seven; their year of *casglu*, they were required to be 'collected' by their warrior mentors and brought to DunTarwddu; the huge and palisaded fortress of the black bull. That ancient citadel was founded high on the frozen and rocky north-eastern promontory known as Penrhyn Dunaed, forever facing the island of Hoi and the monstrous northern ocean. The fearsome and inviolate DunTarwddu would become the seven-year-old Gadwyr initiates' permanent new home, and it was perhaps the most feared fortress in all Prydein. These ranks of muscular and crouching Gadwyr warriors were a long way from home this misty morning, concealed about fifty reeds back from the edge of this unfamiliar coastal forest, and with assured death simmering in their enormous black hearts, these impossibly huge men waited impatiently for this first mission in their service to King Ederus to commence. A large group of horsemen were gathered behind these hulking, bulging men with their long plaits of flame in a clearing in these damp trees. Their mounts' legs were unseen amid the floating wraiths of mist around them, and eerily, they seemed to float upon it. These were unmistakably the lords of this great and silent army of thoroughbreds assembled, and at the head of this elite group sat ruling King Ederus of House Galedon himself. He and his host of officers and

warriors had travelled north from CaerCamelon; his south-eastern, lowland capital on the river Carryn throughout the dark hours of night, and they were now dressed and ready for battle. His lords, his captains and his allied warriors were all arrayed around him in their glory on this mist damp, embryonic morning, but Ederus drew every eye in this fabulous host. The king of Galedon sat easily astride his utterly black warhorse Caddogddu, named for his deep and glossy coat which looks like liquid tar in bright sunlight, but also for his eagerness to war. Caddogddu's long and noble face was encased in a bronze chamfrein of wonderful artistry this morning, deeply cast with the rearing stag of Galedon on its elongated face. It matched the large bronze chest plate, mounted with broad leather straps over an apron of heavy and highly polished mail, all of which protected the chest and shoulders of this magnificent stallion. This polished bronze chest disc was cast beautifully into the same stag cygil of Galedon, and with matching bronze studs shining in all the leatherwork, the horse looked simply imperious, flicking his right ear now with a regal impatience. Mounted upon him, the Galedonian king outshone his beautiful mount this glorious rosy morning, as he had donned his exquisitely crafted battle armour an hour earlier. Ederus wore a fully hooded and brightly polished mail shirt, over which was strapped a strategically placed assembly of protective plates of varying shape, size and mould. These were hand crafted panels of ridged and strengthened bronze plates, each riveted to thick pads of boiled leather and then attached to stout leather strapping. Each plate and bronze panel had been intricately carved and inlaid with pure gold and silver in the runes and swirling, intertwining patterns so loved by the Brythons. These were imbued with the most cunning works of Galedon's druidry, and they had been wrought with ancient spells of protection by their master creator. This beautiful armour when assembled, adjusted and strapped down properly by his Master at Arms and his personal squire Erran presented a flexible, comfortable suit of armour and the pinnacle of current design, both in beauty and performance.

Erran stood a respectable distance from these fidgeting horses but took the head of a large group of both domestic and military squires, as he was the king's personal *arwein*. His round eyes were huge with excitement this morning and they never left those of Ederus, being lit by the glow of unmatched loyalty and adoration. His king became a God before his eyes when he donned that mythical, splendid armour, and which was so infused with powerful magic it made him tremble to handle it and to strap it down. Erran knew each and every whim and expression of his lord, and his gaze was glued fast to his earthly deity amid the tall trees around him and this ghostly, cloying mist. The fabulous armour sat well on Ederus this morning and it was well matched by the magnificent helmet on his noble head, all of which completed the breathtaking accoutrements of the king of Galedon, and Erran's *personal* God of war. The gleaming helm on his noble head had been fashioned from six triangular panels of thick beaten steel with raised joints and a broad brow rim, this inset with the gold circlet of a monarch. Below the rear rim of this helmet, curving metal swooped down to a flare of rolled edge steel, offering protection to the neck, as *that* royal head was the biggest prize of all this morning.

Emerging gracefully and naturally from the domed, reinforced crown of that magnificent helm was the figure of a fully grown, rearing stag in rut. This jewel had been fashioned from pure Galedonian silver and it sported a set of finely worked antlers with twelve sharp points, and it caught the light and twinkled. Two hinged and beautifully pierced steel wings sprang from each side and from the rim of this helmet, giving protection to the cheeks and face of Ederus, whilst a solid bronze nose bar dropped down from the centre of the brow rim, shaped and styled as the tapering face of a young roebuck. Each panel, wing and rim was decorated in the same animated, magical design, and this superb, bespoke helmet was lovingly engraved with sacred and mythical beasts, all writhing and consuming themselves in the familiar sacred, tribal forms and patterns of this nation. Sumptuously lined with soft leather, felt and then silk, this stunning helmet represented the very zenith of that famous armourer's great skill, and in itself was a work of the most beautiful art to behold. This deeply

ancient, sacred design was expounded and carried over to the long bronze amulets and tall greaves the king wore, the latter strapped down over stout leather war boots. Ederus carried the longer, rectangular limewood shield of the horse warrior which was heavier than the ubiquitous round shields of his troops, but it was beautifully made. It had been covered with a hand beaten sheet of thin but hard steel by its maker, the centre of which had been neatly cut out in relief with the rearing stag cygil. This cut out design had then been filled with a molten bronze of a lustrous golden colour by its creator, and when the whole shield had been polished back flat and to a mirror shine, the golden stag would fade in and out of view as the light caught it, and its subtle artistry made most people gape at first sight. It flashed now as Ederus turned slightly to the right in his saddle, catching his eye, and Erran was already stepping forward, striding confidently toward him and braving this shifting mass of huge, steaming horseflesh.

“Hot mead lad and a big horn. I’m spitting feathers!”

He even got a grin from the king, and Erran raced off to the baggage with his face beaming.

His fabulous shield was currently hanging from its hook on his saddle, and so the pommel, grip and cross guard of Ederus’ fabulous sword could be seen in its superb bronze scabbard and taken great comfort from by all. This legendary blade was known across Prydein as *Fwlch-iâ*, the legendary separator ‘Lightning-ice’. This fabled and spellbound sword of so much legend and song had once shattered the renowned widow making blade of one Ardal Hyll; the ugly, impulsive warrior of the Bregantau, slain more than three centuries ago by ArdFergus Fawr himself; first high king of Galedon, being revered and worshiped to this day and to the end of days. Fwlch-iâ is the great head taker of legend, and it gave comfort to all who beheld it. It positively exuded a vital, terrible energy that all warriors drank from, and knowing this, Ederus was proud to display it this morning. Just the solid silver stag’s head which formed the pommel of this magnificent blade was worth more than most people of plain family could

hope to earn in a lifetime of toil. Even the largely hidden baldrick, clipped neatly over his belt was a work of subtle art and intricate beauty. The magnificent, dazzling Ederus rested his gauntleted left hand on the familiar, slightly bent and softly worn, silver antler points on the pommel of *Fwlch-iâ* and looked around himself, at the gŵyr and at the captains of this horde of flesh, steel, wood and leather he had assembled. Many wore fine suits of varying armour and fantastic arms, as each great lord was arrayed in his finery for this historic day, and many carried blades of great fame and reputation to this hotly anticipated battle. None came near to Ederus' dazzling countenance and accoutrements however, as only a king of such powerful and lucrative territories could afford the commissioning of such wondrous arms. Ederus had inherited the great sword obviously, as had his tad, his taid, hêndaid, gorhendaïd and hêngorendaïd before him, but with it, the king of Galedon was thus presented as the very lord of war himself come here to do battle, and all should tremble under his merciless gaze.

Erran's return jolted Ederus out of his reverie, and he was grateful for the brimming horn of excellent mead his squire had brought him. It was only when he began to drink it that he realised just how thirsty he was, and he drained the horn, throwing it back to Erran with a loud belch. The king's teeth emerged through the curls of his beard.

"Off you go then lad, don't stand there gawping or you'll get trampled!" He informed him seriously but could not help the chortle at the boy's pale face as he raced away.

Nodding to himself, Ederus appreciated his brave young squire and not for the first time, making a mental note to reward the boy later. Sitting up he looked around himself refreshed, and behind this imperious group of horsemen he led stood a circle of white robed druids in quiet conclave, but *their* machinations were low on his priorities this morning. Even from this remove, Ederus, these assembled druids and the gŵyrd of Galedon around him could discern the vaguest improvement in the watery light which began to permeate the ranks of trees ahead and around them, and

as the branches were dripping now with a mist borne dew it was a good sign. The sailors in the huge numbers of careful warriors now prepared and tensed for action knew by the sound those waves made crashing to that invisible shore that the tide had turned and was now heading in. The hour was at hand, and the shrouded, unseen promontory ahead and to the right of them, even the forest around them seemed to exhale and settle. As an oystercatcher takes a pause and a deep breath before the plunge, the land around these men became utterly silent and pensive, as if aware of what was about to unfold, either here in this chosen bay or elsewhere, which was Ederus' chief concern. He planned to steal his men away, back to the depths of this forest when the tide turned again if Ardmuc Bay remained unvisited. He would then rest his hopes on the many spies and lookouts he had positioned up and down this tortured coast, but he and his men would return for the following tide. They would be stationed here again the next day and for the next incoming tide, but by which time the main body of the Galedonian army will have arrived, and their ranks would be swollen. Whilst there was safety in the numbers of a complete army, and all the baggage it carried made campaigning life a great deal easier, it also made a host slow to travel, unwieldy to deploy and prey to the capricious nature of warfare. A faster response was deemed necessary than was possible for all of Ederus' great ponderous army, and so the Gadwyr had been called for. These incomparable men will be sorely displeased if the *Scots* and the *Westerners* do not come this misty morning, as their glory comes from the settling of all hostilities and collecting all the best heads and knuckles, long before the great beer belly of the army can even draw near. These eight hundred chosen men had been gripped by anticipation for the days it had taken them to get here, which had slowly become hours, and now the fading stars above them counted down the moments when all would know for certain. They would come to know that their preparations were in vain because they had been careless in some unknown way, or perhaps they would see their shared desires confirmed and their trap sprung. It was in the hands of the

assembled audience of Gods in all their forms, as it has been from the first moment in time in these sacred lands and will be until the last.

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Brach's eyes ached with the strain of trying to see through this cursed sea mist which had descended these last two hours, soaking them all and making navigation almost impossible. By the hourglass they should have found land some time ago, and the tension in this small armada of Hibernian ships rose with every minute that passed. They had navigated by the stars toward this newly chosen location and managed somehow or another to keep in touch with the few other boats around them on this suddenly extended voyage. The open sea had been a simple matter, but this fog complicated things, especially among these convoluted rocky peninsulas and treacherous islets of western Caledon. The other boats around him had drifted in and out of his vision since they had entered the fog bank some time ago, and even sound was suppressed by this all-enveloping, white and rolling blanket. Brach had no idea if the rest of the fleet was at hand, or even if all knew of this last-minute switch in their plans and their surprise journey north. There were no loud voices, only low calls were permitted and those only if absolutely necessary as all knew the dangerous Caledonian coastline could not be much further.

Brach was not at all happy about this change in location which had happened at almost the last minute, in response to some late intelligence. He knew the previous landing location well and the promontory of land that abutted it, and all their planning had been based on landing in Ardmuc Bay alongside that almost unpopulated, sheer sided peninsula. Brach's lords and the other nobility of Hibernia considered the twin principality of Epidia to be vulnerable due to the division of its martial power between its two brothers, or perhaps it was from some other information unknown to Brach, he had no clue. It was deemed that Epidia would not stay united should it be challenged strongly enough, and that once he and his people gained a foothold on that yet unseen coast somewhere in this damnable mist, they would be incredibly hard to winkle

out if the territory was torn apart by the sibling rivalry they hoped would break out if Epidia was invaded. At Ardmuc Bay, they should have taken possession of a natural fortress within that headland and one Brach also knew well as he had explored it and had fished around its wet feet many times. Once they had taken that unpopulated headland, they were going to barricade and secure its landward approach with a quickly dug ditch and berm across its narrowest part, backed then by a reinforced palisade, which they would all quickly have to erect. All the material and tools needed had been stowed on the larger ships, even the long rope ladders should they need to escape those cliffs to the boats, but Brach had seen nor heard anything of those great barques for more than an hour, and it worried him deeply. If Ardmuc Bay proved unfeasible for some unforeseen circumstance, their fallback plan had entailed them sailing much further south, to attack and to vanquish the minor Caledonian fortress of DunOlwen, and again, Brach had no idea why that particular dun had been selected as it seemed a strange choice to him. Their first target had been far more favourable to these mercenaries however, as it did not involve the completely unpredictable siege of a well-founded fortress, regardless of their aristocracy advising them that it would be a walk over, as that was always their attitude. Battle would surely come if they illegally garrisoned land on enemy territory, but they would be the defenders and in a far more secure position. However, due to some knowledge received by his master's spies, neither of these much-researched locations were now the landing point for this invasion. Merely hours ago, they had been given a completely new and unknown destination for this endeavour and had been ordered to sail much further north. They had slogged around Mull and then up Linn Loryn for the last two hours and were now into Loch Linne of all places. This newly proposed territory was less familiar to Brach, and this concerned him as it did all his men, but not nearly so much as finding out their invasion plans were now known to the enemy. One of his captains had sworn that it smelled like a trap, but he had been quickly silenced as nothing was allowed to get in the way of this Gods-sworn and sacred *ionradh*. Brach had one good man in each boat,

someone who had sailed with him, fished and traded with him between these myriad islands and outcrops off the western coast of Brittan for years. He alone held control of these dozen boats which had all come this distance with him from the same village in northeastern Hibernia, and those leaders all looked to him now for direction. Willing the mists to part with all his emotional might, Brach stood in the prow of the lead boat and with one booted foot on the square bow. Straining his eyes and his ears as if his life depended on it, as it clearly did as did those of all his family and friends around him, and Brach's focus narrowed. If they blundered onto a beach packed with enemy from either of the princely brothers who ruled these lands, they would be in serious trouble. The tide had just turned, and the rowers were cheered that they no longer had to fight against it. However, it was only moments later when Brach held his hand up suddenly and the rowing stopped, the men back rowing and fighting the tide once more to hold station. He was pleased to hear the leaders of each boat quietly pass on his instructions, and as he strained all his senses, everything became deathly still around them all. They drifted slowly along on this sympathetic tide at his order, and the mists roiled and curled around them like a congregation of inquisitive ghosts. As they slowed, even the tinkling water music at the bows of each boat diminished, and all became as silent as a grove hidden temple. Brach cupped a hand behind his ear, as he could have sworn he had heard something in the stupefying blankness of this all-enveloping fog. His face lit up as he heard it again. It was the unmistakable sound of surf crashing onto land and it lay dead ahead. He turned and gave another signal to the captains of the boats at either hand and nodded to his crew to continue rowing, but slow and easy. The rolling white stallions pummelling the shoreline ahead mysteriously drifted into view, and Brach was relieved that their rhythmic thumping should cover the sound of their stealthy approach. He urgently scanned the shingle beach beyond those white rollers as it materialised slowly from the gloom. Nothing moved and it looked completely deserted, so Brach took a deep breath and gave the signal. Bracing as the boat shot

forward along with all its neighbours, Brach and his men commenced the 'assault' phase of this marvellous, oath-sworn invasion.

The squared and sharply upswept prow of Brach's boat was designed to run up a beach, and his was the first of these identical boats to push through the surf and grind itself to a halt on the shingle. He urgently scanned the starlit skyline above the ragged, undulating dunes rising ahead of him as his men leapt from the boat to drag it further up. Mercifully, nothing moved, and Brach and his men hurriedly assembled a token shield wall as other boats crunched up the beach behind them. More of his warriors jumped on to this heavy shingle, drawing their weapons and lifting their round shields, all with their eyes wide and clearly ready for anything, this party slowly grew in numbers. This little shield wall also grew as more of these village warriors came ashore, and Brach was surprised that his had been the first to land. The larger ships of the great lords were now emerging from the sea-hugging mist behind him like huge wraith vessels and approaching this wide bay in virtual silence. They had landed in a territory known as Morfern, not Ardmuc Bay and its rocky promontory fifteen miles further south, nor was it the territory of Ganafan further still and the minor Epidian fortress chosen months previously. Brach drew the great steel-headed axe from his belt, and he led his village warband at a trot, uphill and toward the dunes of Morfen ahead. The hefty pebbles underfoot made it hard going, and soon they were all panting as this too was the pivotal moment, and their warrior spirits soared. 'Were they expected or not? Had they charged headlong into a deadly trap?' This question was on all their lips as they ground their way up this deep gravel, their calves burning with the effort. This red faced, *scot* warband crested the first line of dunes, just as a curious moon sailed out into the star-studded sky above, illuminating the whole mountainous region inland of them. Their warrior spirits soared again as each man was ready to fight and eager to give great battle, but not a thing moved in any direction, and not a single person or any light could be discerned anywhere. Hope flared, and Brach once more screwed up his eyes in an attempt to improve his vision. The light was growing steadily as this morning emerged proper,

and as many more dozens of wild, hungry looking warriors moved up this beach behind him, many more were landing and extending the shield wall. A mixed flotilla of the Western Islanders was now arriving from their assembly point on Loch Eil to the north, and the bay became suddenly crowded with big timber shipping, the frantic calls of their sailors carrying clear across the water and up this pebble beach. Brach's vision improved slowly and turning away from the building chaos on the beach below, he could not miss the towering and snow draped grandeur of the Caledonian highlands rearing majestically ahead of him. Although impressed as always, Brach focused on the land immediately around this beach, and kissing an iron ring with relief, he found it deserted. Apart from a weak column of dirty smoke that drifted lazily upwards from a nearby village on this windless but God's blessed day, nothing stirred. Their sacrifices had not been in vain, and there before him lay the unfamiliar but overripe, soft and hopefully bounteous belly of western Caledon. He had been handed an optimistic view from his peers that this pair of coastal principalities they had landed on were in dispute and would be slow to respond, but again, Brach had heard nothing to suggest this rumoured rift in Epidia's leadership even though he had family members living among them. It was all academic now, and so Brach turned and gave the overhead signal to his *tiarna* on the beach below, and even from this position he felt the tension drain from his lord and all who had landed with him. This was quickly passed to those still making their landing, who to a man wore a broad smile now. The lights were in their eyes as good news travels as swiftly as Lord Fwlch himself, and *He* along with all their Gods had surely smiled on them this notable and fortuitous day. Despite an obvious last-minute setback, their glorious and allied undertaking; their Caledon *ionradh* had finally begun; unopposed.

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Just short of noon on this blustery day, and with ragged clouds scudding swiftly across a grey sky that was still full of rain, Ederus joined Nêr Olwydd at this windy Morfern shoreline. The Galedonian king met his

ghost-warrior behind a row of stunted, wind bent hawthorns which took the crown of a line of sand dunes ahead of them. The pale, midday sunlight shone from the armour of Prince Galan ap Cerwyn of the Epidiau, and from his celebrated champion Gŵyr Sel, the captain of their famous cavalry, both of whom awaited their high king, and with the elusive Olwydd sitting in the dappled shade of these same tortured trees. Sel was a much-envied cavalry captain as he had the very best horses in the world at his disposal. The Epidiau have sold these wonderful horses all over the world and for much gold, becoming extraordinarily wealthy in the process. Captain Sel had led two *alau* here, amounting to six hundred of the spectacular, wide-eyed horse lords and horse ladies of their most ancient and honourable Trojan bloodline. The ancient and pale grey predecessors to these fantastic thoroughbreds had come from the infamous Hector's stable, brought here by Brutus himself, and Captain Sel led six hundred of these superb horses here along with their equally spectacular and deadly warrior riders. All his cavalymen were adorned with their bronze-winged helmets and their vivid, sky-blue flowing cloaks, and they were armed with extraordinarily long lances and curvy, tip heavy cavalry swords. The remaining four *alau*, a total of twelve hundred horses and knights were armed and prepared to the south, ready to decamp their duns at the gallop and to take the battle to any enemy force arrayed against them. Young Prince Gallorc of the House Fachomagia joined them too behind this wooded ridgeline, he bringing six hundred spearmen to the action, all bearing their infamous skull cygil and who made up a fearsome rear guard. It was only their close proximity to this region that allowed them to be here at this time. This vassal prince holds the most northerly, coastal stronghold of DunAdar in northern Fachomagia, and it is a vast, shoreside fortress populated by almost a thousand people. DunAdar was built on a short, stubby peninsula which now controls the coastline of the Linn Morwyl, and it is Gallorc's impressive but *liege* stronghold. He and his soldiers were patrolling their southwestern border when riders had caught up with him. They were joined here too this day by Nêr Brith Fawr of the Gadwyr, a mountainous man of huge proportions and who dwarfed the

young Gallorc. He was a man blessed with a grim, craggy and freckled face of immense character, and his honour and his bri were unimpeachable. His deeply weather-beaten face blazed in eternal challenge from a tangled profusion of fiery red, drooping moustaches and a long thick beard of the same. His long hair of the same flaming copper was plaited with the gold-dipped knuckle bones of his slain enemies, and it hung down his immense, rippling back like a blazing mane. This fearsome chieftain seemed completely impervious to this seaborne chill which had drawn woollen mantles about the other officers, and he looked invulnerable to just about anything life could throw at him. Nêr Brith Fawr had led his monstrous men here today, coming all the way from the ice locked region at the head of the vast Druim Alban mountain range, being the granite backbone of northern Prydein and home to the wilder, highland Galedon tribes. This huge chieftain was not a man to be disappointed, as if any such obvious advice were needed, as he was an impossibly large and hugely muscled, man killing brute of national legend. Becoming the undisputed leader of these ultimate warrior, running and killing machines was testament enough to his prowess and his notorious capabilities. Known too to partake in the sacred, annual and highly religious, druid-led procedure of *aberth-bwyt* or the 'sacrificial eating', this fact alone struck terror into the hearts of his enemies and his allies alike.

It is the custom of the Gadwyr, that eleven virgin girls from the villages of the black bull would process in pristine white and garlanded with flowers, all the way up to their great fortress on the headland at each Samhain; the end and the beginning of each year and a time when the earth returns to darkness. At the denouement of their unique priests' deeply mystical procedures and secretive rites, one of these chaste innocents is sacrificed on the truly ancient and grotesque altar of GrutArd himself, and then her prepared body is roasted on the long dog-irons, hung over the blazing firepit of that great hall during much ceremony. A small, token part of her cooked flesh is then consumed by every single warrior of the Gadwyr. This is done in eternal honour and worship to their God; the giant and immortal PenAgr warrior GrutArd, whose terrifying black bull temple takes centre

place in their legendary stronghold of DunTarwddu. Their fortress of the black bull is the isolated, ice locked and vast military complex where the awkward, coltish and long-limbed boys of its brotherhood are forged into the very essence of their creed; 'iron, blood and sacrifice'. This mantra becomes to them the very meaning of their hard and cold, unrelenting existence. From the moment they stepped through the huge gates of DunTarwddu at the age of seven, failure meant death, and the surviving boys were transformed inside a decade into monstrous, completely tattooed, ferocious and absolutely fearless warriors. They became killers of such empirical skill and widespread repute, their name had spread in whispers to the very corners of the known world, and yet no one beyond the boundaries of sacred Prydein knew where they came from. Many of their best, elite warriors had earned fortunes as mercenaries around the world, and these seasoned killers had settled in Gallia or other more temperate places as the silver began to shine in their fiery golden hair. Some; the real legends had returned to *arfordir y tarw ddu*, that rocky, sparse and inhospitable, high-northern 'coast of the black bull' following their mercenary careers, as had Brith, to teach the subtle and the not-so-subtle arts of mortal combat. These giants of men returned to their cold, tribal stronghold and hoped to grow old there in the close brotherhood of the Gadwyr in their monstrous citadel, until it was their time to cross the bridge of swords to the Underworld. There they would await Arglwydd Lug Ddu's pleasure, as all men did, for a period known only to the Gods. They would wait there until the third side of life's triad existence fell into place and they were born once again, somewhere in this world.

Nêr Brith's Gadwyr had once again run all morning to keep up with the mounted officers and the cavalry of this fast response and highly mobile force so they could be the first troops to draw blood this day, and they waited patiently now as their leaders congregated, ever hopeful, ever eager to do battle. Olwydd nodded respectfully to Ederus and to the other lords as they approached, giving the unmistakable two-handed signal for careful approach. The view from this wind blasted ridge looked down to the wide and curving, shingle beach of Cuil Bay, bent around the grey and

frigid waters of the great sea Loch Linne. There lay beached a huge number of various sized craft, most being the shallow bottomed fishing boats favoured by the Iweriu and the Western Islanders alike, and there were many hundreds of these drawn up on the shore. Further out in the bay floated several much larger ships, each of which looked like it could carry over two hundred men and much equipment. These were moored a little further out in the bay but restrained from drifting away by long hempen ropes, all of which were tied to iron stakes and driven deep into the shingle. A couple of dozen warriors remained to guard this fleet from inquisitive locals, and these were huddled around a mean fire on the furthest end of this beach, and it was clear they were more interested in the drover's lane that headed through the dunes to the west than the other approaches. They seemed to be awaiting the return of their relief and a share of the spoils before heading for the newly conquered dun three miles north perhaps. They were too no doubt hoping to be included in tomorrow's raiding, and taking their turn at the easy rape, robbery and the slaughter of the largely defenceless villagers hereabouts. Ederus gave his orders, and these lords of war watched them being carried out from their place of concealment behind this high sandy ridgeline and its crown of weather gnarled hawthorns.

A detachment of cavalry moved north behind this line of dunes and out of sight of the beach, to appear at the furthest end of this long stretch of shingle and from where the lane to the west began. Ederus recognised the swarthy captain at the head of this mounted force from his morning meeting with him, and he smiled as his cavalry formed up at the head of this beach, their eye catching, sky-blue cloaks making a vibrant mockery of the grey and moody sky above them. The enemy guards leapt to their feet in alarm at the unmistakable sound of fifty long cavalry swords being drawn, and they fled instantly at the sight of those Epidian knights with no thought of anything but escape. They ran for their lives across this deep, dragging shingle as Galan's cavalry began to trot after them, their rider's helmets and blades flashing extravagantly in this weak sunlight. That ragged group of scruffy scots had discarded their battered old swords and

shields and were wildly ploughing through the energy sapping shingle towards this royal group of observers, their woollen kirts flying and their white knees pumping, but on their faces was written the truth of the matter at hand, and they knew to a man they were doomed. Their fears were rudely confirmed, as they were brought up short by the sight of twenty huge and broad chested warriors of the Gadwyr as they stepped out onto the beach in front of them, and these monstrous men needed no introduction. The swirling blue, oak gall tattoos on their huge and massively developed bodies spoke of lithe and swift footed animals of both this world and the next, and the broad leather belts that crossed their barrel chests gleamed with fresh lanolin. Ederus' battle spirit was raised as he watched his novel Gadwyr move lithely and precisely now into their spread formation on the beach below, deliberately taking their time in the procedure, smiling wickedly as they drew their monstrous battle axes and clearly savouring each threat filled moment. The Gadwyr revel in the fear they cause in all who behold them, and this was often the last thing their enemies ever felt, apart perhaps from a flash of terminal neck pain. The Gadwyr revere their two enormous battle axes which they use so effectively in war, and their freshly honed edges caught the morning light, glinting menacingly. Concealment was no longer an issue, so the mounted lords crested the largest dune and gathered around their high king to overlook the newly and unlawfully annexed beach of Cuil Bay. Ederus stood tall with his feet apart on the crown of this dune and as he looked down to the precise formation of horsemen approaching across the heavy gravel, and they moved toward him in such fine form and superb control, it pleased him immensely.

"Magnificent Galan, truly magnificent. I honour you both for your immediate call to Galedon's aid." Ederus nodded to the Epidian prince mounted to his right hand and to his friend and younger ally, Prince Gallorc of the House Fachomagia.

"You honour *me* King Ederus by your call to arms, and it is my sworn duty and a great personal pleasure to be able to serve you and Galedon again

this day.” Galan replied formally with a deep and respectful bow from the saddle, and Gallorc nodded his agreement alongside him.

Prince Galan was a rugged looking man of a good age, over thirty by the touch of grey showing in his black beard and the long plait of black hair that caressed the glorious gold torc around his neck, before then draping fashionably over the polished plate at his left shoulder. He was turned out in an extremely light and elegant, bronze-accented armour of the old style strapped over a finely made coat of polished *llurig*. These were complimented by his fabulous *gold*-winged helmet and the long blue, hooded cloak of his House which draped elegantly over the back of his saddle, and Galan looked the very image of the Greek warrior from a long age past. His pure white mare was the most magnificent beast Ederus had ever seen in his long life, and he found it very difficult to take his eyes from this marvellous and enormous, noble animal. She eyed him intelligently in return, even with a measure of disdain, which entirely captivated Ederus. He wondered idly what magical offspring that honourable and fabulous horse lady Galwena would produce if mated with his own stygian Caddogddu, who was a noble Epidian himself, and he made a mental note to broach the subject with Galan later.

“May I your Majesty?” Prince Galan asked him, breaking his thoughts with a slight but sincere bow from the waist. Ederus managed to drag his gaze upwards from the perfection of the great horse lady to the seated prince in all his finery on her back, and he nodded with a smile.

“Please do Galan, my old and honoured friend.” Ederus replied, and with a gruffness to his voice from the emotions that were welling in him. It had always been this way with him since he was a boy. The *combrogi* is what he loved above all, but this common and much-used word for ‘fellowship’ also meant comrade-in-arms and family member. It was this soldiering fellowship that comes with a properly run military campaign was what thrilled Ederus the most, and it always had. This allied response had many other benefits, not just in repelling this western invasion but in strengthening the alliance, and Ederus knew the important thing was to

develop and to form lasting relationships with all the various tribes of Galedon to the mutual good of all. This is what he had come to consider his purpose in life, over and above the daily workload that comes with running such a large and diverse kingdom. Galan made a circular motion with his right hand above his head and the response down on the beach was almost instant. The cavalry changed into a crescent formation of containment, and their long and leaf shaped swords, also of purely Trojan heritage dipped with a menacing intent, driving those scots toward the Gadwyr, moving forward like menacing predators themselves all need for speedy pursuit gone. Dozens more huge and instantly recognisable warriors of the Gadwyr moved to fill the ridgeline overlooking this beach, and the Iweriuan guards fell to their knees wailing for mercy as these grinning, swirling blue Galedonian giants surrounded them with their gleaming, terrifying battle axes. These trespassers were hauled to their feet and dragged up the dunes to the treeline, where they were stripped and bound hand and foot. Each was then soundly gagged and made to sit at the foot of the tree that had been chosen for him, in plain sight of the lords, priests and the assembled warriors who would judge them all this historic day.

One of the large ships moored in the bay had been found to contain a mountain of sharpened logs and hundreds of reeds of good rope and many tools, evidence of their building and fortifying objectives. Hundreds of jute sacks were also found in the bilges, and these were filled with four-point horse scourges; caltrops. These were nothing more than two sticks of blackthorn root wickedly sharpened at both ends, softened in steam and then bent around each other, before then being bound with strong hoof glue and sap-smeared twine. However, any ground littered with these cruel spikes would cause huge damage to horses hooves and disarray to any cavalry, and the Epidians were incensed by this discovery. The damage those nefarious equine foot foulds could cause their beloved horses made their blood boil. The captains were forced to move smartly between these winged warriors, keeping order and calming their passion for immediate pursuit and instant slaughter. With an eye to the future,

Ederus took personal possession of these sacks of caltrops, as he was a firm believer in the old adage; 'It is better to have and not need, than to need and not have'. A hundred spearmen of the Fachomagiau were sent forth with iron, flint and large sacks of *pygal*; turnip-sized faggots made from tightly bound sacking balls, filled with a pasty mixture of pitch, wood alcohol, tree resin, sawdust and powdered charcoal. Each fishing boat, trader and the seven great ships, once stripped of any metal were fired. These faggots worked their magic and within minutes the whole fleet was ablaze. The leaping, crackling infernos which ballooned from the biggest ships, especially the timber laden barques joined into one rolling explosion of flame, casting long and glittering reflections across this bay and the turbulent waters of Loch Linne. A towering column of black and writhing smoke lifted to the heavens above Cuil Bay, festooned with glowing and crackling sparks, and it was watched sombrely from the dunes by the row of twenty-three bound and gagged prisoners.

Galan's druid Giôn, in his white flowing robe and sharply tonsured hair crouched and spoke quietly to each condemned man, who had a noose of rope already about his neck, so there was no doubt as to this day's outcome. However, none were prepared for the malevolent and truly terrifying curses and spell promises that Giôn made on each naked man. The druid tucked a sprig of black mistletoe into the bindings of each man to communicate this condemnation, mumbling continuously and marking them out for the *Dark Lord* on their imminent arrival. Mistletoe possesses a powerful magic, and when it is found growing on one of their sacred oaks; a rare event, the druids become ecstatic. Six days following the next new moon, an arch-druid would climb the tree and harvest that parasitical plant with a gold bladed knife to much ceremony. It is perhaps the most venerated plant in all druidry, and Giôn wielded it this day as a warrior wields his sword. As he whispered in their ears, each prisoner writhed and struggled against the druid's words in absolute terror, and thus constrained and with no way to drown out the words with their own, they were doomed to receive Giôn's inspired and malicious work. Each man shook his head wildly and continued to struggle and moan as if gripped by

some unseen demon, and these men continued to thrash and writhe as Giôn anointed each one of their shaking heads with a noxious looking fluid from a vial. Once all were utterly condemned in this world and the next, a Gadwyr warrior seized each man and removed his gag, forcing him to stand whilst two others hauled on the rope. One at a time, they were all unceremoniously lynched with the stout hemp ropes from these branches, high on the front rank of the trees overlooking this beach. Their bodies kicked and bucked as the life was choked from each man, their tanned and thrashing lower legs and forearms incongruous beside their stark white thighs and upper bodies. Slowly and inevitably, they succumbed, and each invader proceeded headlong into the Underworld, no doubt still struggling as he was brought to face the terrible eternity that Giôn's cunning and ancient words had wrought for them all.

A large gathering of druids and uati had studied the death throes of each man closely, reading the transitory and often obscured spirit messages from each drawn out death and discussing each point of importance as it presented itself. This undulating row of twenty-three filthy, trussed and naked bodies with their grotesquely bloated, purple faces and their swollen, protruding tongues were left to swing in the breeze as fair warning to others. The great and venerable brif-druid, prime-necromancer and principal-chemist of all Prydain emerged from the centre of this large group of white robed colleagues, and he approached King Ederus in his ponderous gait followed closely by Guron, Einion and Drem; the three arch-druids of AurArian *Aruchel*, or the 'lofty one' as he is also called. The 'gold-silver' part of this man's name is meant to convey the unyielding, everlasting attributes of those two noble metals. However, *HênDdu* is a more popular name for this dread, all-powerful person of world repute, as this name; 'ancient darkness' more closely matches this tall druid's almost unbelievable reputation. HênDdu stands well over six feet tall in his long white robe, towering over his retinue, and at an undeclared age of eighty-seven, his physicality seems undimmed. All his contemporaries are long dead, yet amazingly AurArian looks a fit, strong and healthy man in his late forties, perhaps early fifties. His perfect tonsure runs cleanly from

ear to ear, revealing and opening the front part of his skull to the ether, and this was ever the cut of the druid. The face below this bare and weathered brow bears the flint edged and granite expression of a true Brythonic warrior. The wide set but strange eyes penetrate to the very soul and have an entirely unsettling effect on whoever is held fast in their ferocious gaze. They are at once green and blue with motes of dangerous, amber light dancing chaotically in their terrifying and unreadable depths. His nose is long and aristocratic, and the mouth above the square jaw is wide and generous, showing perfect teeth. The overall look of this prime-druid is one of supreme toughness and a lively intelligence, sagacity, courage and an immutable will of forged steel, as hard and as unyielding as his long and serious face.

“King Ederus!” HênDdu greeted the high king easily and informally, speaking with an unnerving character to his voice, similar to a disconnected vibrato but more in the throat, like the buzz of a large bumblebee caught in his larynx. This astonishing and highly intimidating sound changed in tone randomly and shifted in the background, whilst the spoken words of the man were still clear and discernible over it. It was as if the druid was speaking in more than one creature’s voice, and it terrified almost everyone who heard him speak. This was HênDdu; the omnipotent legend, who as a boy flew to the far eastern shores of the earth on Peg; the winged unicorn of Arglwydd Arianrrhod herself, and there slew an enormous, fire bellowing dragon a hundred reeds long and which was devouring the tiny yellow people of that distant land. This too is AurArian *Aruchel*, who three score years ago walked across the water of the southern channel to Gallia, where, as a young man he strode to the north-eastern borderlands and there defeated the ancient and great wizaerd *Alf* of the Germanics. That terrifying and infamous German wizaerd with his yellow hair of flames and his glowing staff of reputedly immense power had come forth from his cave midden to meet AurArian Aruchel. Alf had not only challenged the prime druid of Prydein but had questioned the very heart of all spiritual learning, that which had sprung from Môn in Khumry; druidism itself. Alf had denied and had defied the

power of Brythonic druidism, claiming in his delusion that his Celtic Gods were far more powerful. At HênDdu's arrival, that continental land along with all the attendant Gods of this earth had trembled in anticipation. However, HênDdu had treated Alf with scorn as a champion would a petulant child and had bound him up with such strong magic, he could barely move a muscle. Alf had been powerless as the great brif-druid and necromancer of Prydein had removed the infamous staff from the wizaerd's numb fingers and broke it over his knee, thus breaking the wizaerd and rendering him utterly powerless. With the Lords Fwlch and Taranu tearing up the heavens above him, HênDdu had then shaved the cur, weaving a long, braided rope from the German's own flaming hair and beard to lead him like a dog through the villages, trefs and duns of Gallia in the greatest of shame and defeat, where he was beaten with sticks and pelted with all manner of foul things. That erstwhile lord of esoteric power and the prime-wizaerd of all Germania was thus punished for the horrors he had unleashed on those people during his reign of terror, from deformed calves and lambs to miscarriages of birth, and from sickness among the werrin to failed crops and drought. On reaching Aremorica, HênDdu had sacrificed the wretch at the great temple on Ynys Trebes amid tremendous celebration and feasting. The people of Aremorica and wider Gallia were blessed with ten years of bumper crops from that moment, and these stories are part of all Prydein's great and long history, being taught from the most southwestern, temperate coastline of the Cornafau Dde, to the furthest, frozen coastline of the northern Cornafau Ddu and everywhere in between.

This legendary man now stood before him, and whilst Ederus was no shrinking violet and he had seen his fair share of strange and barbaric stuff in his life, this was entirely different. AurArian's spirit voice made him feel uncomfortable in a way that he had never experienced before, causing his very heart to tremble. This all-powerful druid seemed to speak to the core of your soul, and his piercing, wildly kaleidoscopic eyes could look into the same with a cold and shocking power. The command and influence of this man was astonishing, and it was only that this

unquestionable power was held by such Gods-given, inspirational, scrupulously honest and irrefutably honourable giants of men that kept the very earth itself safe.

“Honourable and revered Brif-Druid AurArian Aruchel, my lord and teacher HênDdu, it is an honour and a pleasure to see you again.” Ederus demurred, bowing his head to the man.

“The auguries spoke of a great treason, King Ederus ap Ewin ap Ewin ap Durstus Fawr!” This regal and authoritative druid responded seriously and in his vibrating yet musical voice, giving the honour of full title, but Ederus’ mood darkened at these portentous words.

“A traitor?” Ederus seethed.

“Yes Ederus ap Ewin, treacherous intelligence was sent to that so-called *western king*. He and that Iweriuan blackguard received word that we knew of his intended invasion point at Ardmuc Bay. He was informed that we were expecting him and that Iweriuan rogue there, and by this treason was able to change their landing point in the final hours!” His strangely vibrating voice continued ominously and powerfully, rising with anger.

“This was done with great cunning, and the identity of the traitor was hidden from us by powerful Iweriuan magic, which we cannot break from this remove. But we have seen the invading enemy King Ederus and know also where they will lay in one quadrant of Arglwydd Bel. This much was deduced from the death throes of those verminous creatures.” The druid added in his verbal tremor, glancing at the row of swinging figures on the ridge and spitting before continuing with a scowl. “They have ill-spent their time King Ederus and have not yet crossed Loch Linne to the Neweis peninsula. They will soon attempt to cross that bridge to conquer DunBalla now of all places, and in doing so, they will put themselves in a precarious situation. So, your labours this day may be successful yet King Ederus if we are swift, and so let us hope that this treason is mitigated by bringing our host to bear and by causing a sacred letting of much western and foreign blood!” The unnerving buzzing stopped, and his mouth thinned as if the druid attempted a smile, but his animated eyes were that

of an eagle and Ederus struggled to keep his nerve in their unwavering gaze, but he too came from a proud bloodline and he steeled himself.

“This may indeed make sense finally my lord HênDdu. It explains a number of things, but if the enemy are found, does this mean we can send the bird messengers to DunAdda my lord, to release the Epidians?”

Ederus asked him then, clumsily sidestepping the responsibility. This elicited a sharp look from the druid.

“You doubt the truth of our divinations Ederus?” Whilst the question was quietly asked, the threatening undercurrent was as unmissable as the missing title and the unnerving, angry buzzing.

“Not for even the most fleeting of moments HênDdu! On my honour, we shall remove those invading vermin from this world dread lord, and you and I will drink wine from the wet skulls of both Brude Bredus and Conair Môr tonight!” Ederus responded bravely, allowing his fury to show and his eyes to blaze the oath. AurArian nodded almost unperceptively in acceptance before turning away, and without another word, this commanding druid led his retinue away to the horse drawn *cludiaid* of his religious order.

Ederus drew a deep breath and calmed himself, feeling his heart thudding in his chest as he watched the religious principal of all Prydein depart to his order and his spectacular carriage. Those seated carriages were no more than adapted farm carts in reality, with a stepped rear tailgate and a timber bench along each side within, but they allowed the druids a way in which they could travel with this allied army and still discuss important matters in some sort of privacy. The higher echelons of the priesthood had good horses of course, but these *cludiaid* allowed them to do much more on their journeys as they were hauled along by four big northern work horses and a driver on the elevated bench at the front, all of which of course *he* had paid for. AurArian’s state cludiad was a thing of great beauty, with raised timber framework and a simple pitched roof of hewn planks affixed to the top. This framework allowed black leather curtains to be drawn completely around the carriage for when secrecy was required,

and these blinds were embossed with the constellations of the stars and highlighted with silver foil. Every inch of wood on HênDdu's extravagant carriage had been lovingly carved and scalloped by a real artisan, with swirling visions of mythical beasts of this world and the next in the most tortured, writhing forms. The stunning designs on his beautiful cludiad had then been painted in its various colours with great care, and the raised points and features of these marvellous carvings were also lavishly covered then in silver and gold foil. The two matched pairs of black horses hauling this state carriage were attached to the great yoke with gleaming, silver studded leatherwork, matched only by their gleaming harnesses. The coal black manes of the four magnificent horses had been gathered into rows of seven peaks, each tipped with a silver finial in a star shape, and they looked magnificent under the trees and in the dappled sunlight as they waited patiently. Regardless of the cold, in bright and sharply sunlit days like today, it was such a terrifying and awe-inspiring sight many plain folk would fall to their knees on seeing it approach. These innocent werrin would kneel and cover their heads with their hands in the terrifying and certain belief that a great God had come amongst them and that it must surely be the end of days.

With a scowling nod from Ederus, this Galedonian host wheeled from the beach and headed for the broad drover's road that led north from this shore and toward the white, glistening majesty of the highlands beyond. The two alau of cavalry fell in behind the lords, and in the vanguard trotted eight hundred blood thirsty Gadwyr. The religious order in their carts took the lead of the rear guard, kicking up clouds of dirty snow ahead of the ranks of six hundred spearmen of the Fachomagiau in column. The message birds had been released into the wind, and they flew overhead in two increasing circles until they got their bearings and flew like arrows to their homes in the cotes of DunOlwen, DunAdda, DunBerth and CaerCamelon, a pair with identical messages flying to each Galedon stronghold. Within the hour Ederus' lead scouts had galloped in, confirming that the Iweriuan host was indeed amassed near Aber Coe as the druids had predicted, and that they had now congregated around the

bridge where Loch Lefan passed through a pinch of land, galvanised no doubt by the tower of ominous black smoke rising from their landing place. There was a great horseshoe of granite mountain between Ederus' army and those invaders on that rounded promontory, but he came to realise following a swift discussion with a local captain that if he sent his cavalry the longer eastern route around this obstacle, it would give the Gadwyr equal time to run the shorter western route along the coast. In this way, they could trap those *gelyn* between the two horns of his great bull of war he had brought to this task, and if his instincts were correct, that enemy would be forced to make a fatal error. There was much to do in the meantime however, and so Ederus confidently gave out his orders which were swiftly disseminated by his captains, and without a sound, the Gadwyr set off to their left in disciplined formation. The enormous Nêr Brith led those animated Gadwyr away at an electric pace, clearly challenging the cavalry to be there in support, if they could. Ederus watched closely as Prince Galan's face became animated at this unvoiced but obvious challenge, and he saw the terse smile confirm the right spirit in which that challenge had been received. He could not stop himself smiling either as Galan caught his eye, and Ederus gave him the open hand of accord. The Epidian prince nodded to his Gŵyr Sel at this, who threw his arm up in signal before spurring his great horse into a gallop, and his cavalry tore after him to the right around this huge mountain, the warriors of Epidia whooping in savage glee and their sky-blue cloaks billowing behind them. The magnificent horse lady Galwena reared mightily at this, showing her teeth and flailing her deadly hooves, she too accepting the challenge, and Galan leaned forward, sitting astride her easily as if they were both one awesome, rearing beast. Her enormous, iron shod forehooves hit the ground and they thundered off in a cloud of dirty snow and toward the coastal flatlands, ahead and to the left of this granite massive. The lords and gŵyrd of Galedon followed him at a gallop and on the heels of the already distant Gadwyr. The rearguard spearmen of Fachomagia had been commanded to form two halves, one to wheel right and follow the cavalry east and to catch any enemy that were lucky

enough to escape the horse lords and their winged warriors. The other half was tasked to continue eating dust and to wheel left as rearguard to the druid caravan, which now followed the lord's advance to the west and the coastal route.

Clouds of gritty snow and dirt swirled and billowed into the cold air as this great host proceeded to the left and to the right around this mountainous obstacle, and once again the Morfern shoreline became deserted, leaving no living witnesses to the spectacular, roaring and crackling conflagration in its bay.



Chapter Four.

Cadwy sat up in his sickbed still swathed around the head by a great bandage, but his eyes were clear now. His speech and his mind were sharp too, as was his appetite. Hefin his cousin and closest friend and one of the five *cyfail* that were his constant companions throughout his young life was there with him, sitting at the foot of the bed in this sickroom. His cyfail were the sons of the princes and senior gŵyr of the various Houses of Albion, and Hefin was his late uncle Brynig's son. Hefin was bringing Cadwy up to date with everything that had happened since his hunting injury, both local gossip and the portentous things that were happening elsewhere in Prydein and abroad. A basket of the delicious local butter cakes shared this big bed between them, and the Selgofan princes were munching their way through them.

"So Brude Bredus of the Western Isles and King Conair Môr have allied and have invaded Galedon? Oh Gods, against King Ederus' great war host? I would love to see that battle Hefin. I bet the Gadwyr are the first in!" Cadwy declared with a grunt from his sore ribs, still chewing.

"Of course, they're part of Galedon now. I hadn't thought of that. Lug's arse! If half of what we've heard about them is true, I hope we never have to go to war with Galedon again!" Hefin said seriously, and Cadwy added his nods of agreement. "The Gadwyr EAT virgin girls Cadwy!" Hefin added, his young eyes wide in horror-filled disbelief.

"That much is true I'm told, cousin." Cadwy answered his younger friend casually. "I know what I'd rather do with them!" He added with a wink, grabbing another cake carefully from the basket.

Hefin's eyes got bigger.

“Cadwy! They’re only eleven years old!” He admonished him and Cadwy curled his lip at this.

“Mm, I forgot. You’re right Hef, they’re all teeth, bones and tears at that age!” He expressed his vast experience in this regard, leaning back to the pillows with a grimace. He *almost* had a girlfriend, and what a girl!

Cadwy’s mind flew a familiar route of late; back to the flawless young face of the honourable and eternally beautiful, seventeen-year-old Princess Eirwen of Galedon, who’s nation was now at war as he had just been informed. She had been in his thoughts persistently since he had first met the young princess in the company of his great-aunt, Lady Meleri. That had been at the ‘year and a day’ festival at Samhain, seventeen long days previously, and each night since he had dreamed of her, and him; together.

The year-and-a-day festival of light, poetry, singing and all the sacred arts is held toward the end of each year and is an integral part of the week-long holy Samhain festival, the festival of the dead. Samhain is not only a time to honour the glorious dead, but like all the seasons of the year it is a busy period for the werrin. Samhain is the final ‘winter’ festival in Prydein, known as ‘Li-Tu Dub’ in ancient times, and it begins at midnight on *Ysgaw dauddeg-wyth*; the 28th and last day of Ysgaw; the final month in the year’s lunar cycle of thirteen. It is the penultimate day of each year, leaving as always the additional ‘day in the year’; the sacred inspiration for the ‘year and a day’ festival. As joint matron of Côr Ynys Gwyn, the all-female druidic college on the Myrun Isles in Galedon, Lady Meleri of Albion had taken Cadwy as her escort to this festival, held on holy Ynys Medcaut and in the kingdom of Fotadina off Albion’s eastern coast. That festival had been a wonderfully intoxicating experience, and one Cadwy would never forget for many reasons. The main island laying off Medcaut Bay was one of the most ancient and original locations for the festival, and all it’s incredible sights, smells, tastes and sounds had been captivating. The smaller and landward Ynys Caru had hosted a naked group of communities that night, all dedicated to the hedonistic and sophisticated

art of lovemaking. The large but temporary hazel and canvas shelters on that smaller isle had been festooned with skulls and flowers and were surrounded by dozens of campfires and hundreds of roaring torches, all of which had made that little island a bejewelled, twinkling oasis in the dark. Musicians had wandered those fragrant hillsides dressed in black rags and playing the holy triad of melody; the harp, the crwth and the reed flute, whilst the tents around them writhed with the rhythmic, coupling bodies of their ecstatic occupants. Many herbs, fungi and other compounds were eaten, drunk and smoked there, and which had transported those huge groups of people to various stages of narcosis; from euphoria and endless energy to sparkling and pulsating hallucination. Young and nubile servants had also meandered among those many groups, offering wine or beer, fruit and other delicacies, and across that small island was peace, bliss and eternal love. At next spring's Imbolc *Li-Tu*, both islands will be dedicated to the fertility of this earth, making the exploits on Ynys Caru that night look tame in comparison. Overlooking the spectacular bay of Medcaut perches the ancient and palisaded DunGwardd, founded on the high promontory to the south, and that huge fortress had offered the Albion party its quarters for the celebrations.

Cadwy had not been allowed anywhere near that long and swaying, rope and timber foot bridge which led to the smaller island of eternal love, much to his chagrin. He had enjoyed the festival well enough though despite this expected exclusion. The singing had been an awe inspiring and a spiritual experience, especially when the cantorion of the Enouanta had taken the stage. The three-tiered assembly of that thirty-three-member, all-male choir from the southwestern region of Albion was famous in Prydein and across the known world. Those lauded Galwyddel cantorion from Enouanta had just returned from travelling the breadth of Gallia for three years and in a great convoy of ox-drawn carts, enchanting every massed audience they had sung to, and making even such a large troupe extremely wealthy. The hair on Cadwy's neck and forearms had risen in superstitious awe when the Galwyddel had performed from the

high northern battlements of DunGwardd, surrounded by tall burning torches, and resplendent as always in their chosen *gwisgoed y werrin*; the humble attire of matching mantle and trews which had been an all-black weave that night. The rude, plaited shoes of the werrin completed the clothing of the working people of Prydein, and which those wealthy, professional singers took great pride in wearing. The crushing crescendo of their performance that night had been the ancient 'Death song of Leir', and Cadwy had held his great Aunt's bony hand tightly in his, and she had wept at the heartrending words to what is surely the most enduringly popular song in all Prydein. Nobody could sing that great tragedy with the power and the emotions of those unmatched Galwyddel, and Cadwy had known that the words reminded his aunt so painfully of her long-lost husband. Before long, the hushed and electric atmosphere, the wondrous harmonising voices and the achingly tragic lyrics had woven their ancient spell and had wrung the emotions from his very soul. Cadwy's bottom lip had trembled, his tears had broken, and they had streamed down his cheeks, but he had sat as stiff as a broom not daring to wipe his eyes for long moments as the glorious voices had washed over him, soaring to the starlit heavens above and lifting his soul up there with them.

"It takes a real man to cry Cadwy bach." His great Aunt had spoken quietly to him at his side, and in a lull in the singing. Turning, he had seen through his watery tears the smiling face of Lady Meleri, and Cadwy had laughed. Meleri could not help herself but laugh too, and they had laughed together then, holding hands tightly and with wet, shining faces. An old woman and a young man bound close by their blood, closer by their fealty and eternally by their obvious love for each other.

As Cadwy chewed methodically on the butter biscuit in his sickbed, he thought of his deeply impressive *hênmodryb* and the long conversation they had shared on their return. Not only had her plans filled him with an excitement he could not quite justify at the time, but they had also given him a rare insight to his great aunt's fearsome intellect and the way in which her devious mind worked. He had not given a thought to her

astonishing strategic grasp of the bigger picture and the state of play in these highly-strung northern territories that night, as the emotional and physical toll of the festival and escorting his venerable charge safely through that ecstatic throng had been extremely demanding. He smiled now as he thought of that performance by the amazing Enouantan cantorion and the rest of that enlightening evening, as it had seemed to mark a pivotal moment in his relationship with his great aunt, bringing them closer together in some subtle and unspoken way. He remembered vividly that when the singing had started again and the soaring, harmonising voices of those marvellous Brythons had burst into the opening stanza to the famous victory of 'Arglwydd Clwyd', he and Meleri had both cried again. They had wept happy tears that time, and their souls had rejoiced together as the tenors had soared to the highest notes among the stars and the basses and baritones had vibrated the very air around them.

Breaking their fast the following morning at DunGwardd and on the high headland overlooking the bay, its ocean views were stunning, and the great hall of Gŵyr Huw ap Irfonwy had been packed out. That largely absent Fotadina lord of Medcaut was the powerless noble of that locality as all was ruled by the priesthood of those two islands, and they held the reins of that entire region with a firm grip, which included Cadwy's spiritual mentor. Cadwy had worn a fine and long, kid leather jacket of a deep oxblood that morning and which had shone in the morning sunlight. Gleaming with the sheen of fresh lanolin, it had a broad collar and had been decorated with a row of highly polished, silver boar's head buttons. That soft leather coat had been tailored to fit him like a glove, and it hugged his waist, cut to fit the muscular flare of his broad back and to show the powerful breadth of his shoulders. This he had worn over a pair of fine woollen bracs with a subtle, chequered weave and picked out with square panels of the same deep red. His new bracs had been tucked into a highly polished pair of tall, oxblood riding boots that morning with contrasting glossy black collars. A white linen shirt lay open at his throat,

revealing the beautiful and intricately twisted, golden torc of a wealthy if unconfirmed *tywysog*; a warrior-prince. The pure silver terminals of this heavy royal torc were each formed into the protruding shape of a tusked boar's head, and it had clearly denoted his royal lineage and confirmed that he belonged to the ruling House Selgofa of Albion. Selgofa held the *rheolwr y grym* over the other tribes of Albion, and Cridas' House had for countless generations held this 'ruling power', making all the difference in how this young and dapper crown prince had been viewed and received in *vassa*/ Fotadina. A servant had plaited Cadwy's long and golden hair that morning and had tied it back with a maroon silk ribbon, which he had casually laid over his left shoulder as was now fashionable. The tall, broad and ruggedly handsome young prince had been the object of many surreptitious looks throughout that morning, but Cadwy's focus had been on his geriatric great aunt. These unseen appraisals had come from the hundreds of young women which had thronged the island, but the bolder, more overtly acquisitive looks that morning had come from the more advanced and aristocratic among them. Most of that fascinated inspection had gone virtually unnoticed by Cadwy, as his focus had been on the personal care of his beloved *hênmodryb*. Completely unaware that he had become the hot topic of discussion among the females of a certain age and status, and there had been a great number of those highly competitive young ladies present on Ynys Medcaut, Cadwy had been oblivious. Unwittingly and on arrival, he had unleashed a wave of merciless female politics across the festival grounds and this nearby fortress. That final bright and sunny morning however he had sparked a minor war, and Cadwy had innocently initiated a flurry of frantic activity in a number of the more ambitious of these noble maidens' chambers. Behind the heavy drapes their servants had jumped as costumes were changed, and perfume was liberally applied. Hair was furiously brushed and braided whilst ruthless schemes were frantically conjured.

Cadwy had picked up Lady Meleri's basket of warm and soft bread squares along with his own in one hand, and carefully supporting her left

elbow, he had helped her toward a deep and comfortable chair by the roaring, central hearth. He had noticed that the hall was far busier that morning for some reason, and there seemed to be excited young girls everywhere and all dressed up in silks and furs. He was forced to wonder why, as he had thought the festival almost finished. Cadwy had fervently hoped there was no cheesy 'end of Li-Tu celebration' going on that morning that he knew nothing about and which he would be forced to endure, as he had suffered a poor night's sleep. His final night there had been filled with lurid images of a frantic, writhing Ynys Caru and he had been exhausted, just wanting a quiet morning and a decent break of fast before beginning the long ride home. People had fallen silent and parted, making way for the famous pair as Cadwy led Meleri through this perfumed throng, clearly aware of her painful hip and careful that her way was clear. As soon as his aunt was comfortable in the chair, Cadwy had placed the bread baskets on the adjacent low table and called a servant over to take their order. Turning to take the chair opposite, Cadwy was struck square between the eyes by a thunderbolt! A pair of magical, captivating eyes of the most wondrous emerald green he had ever imagined had locked with his, and the shock had rocked his foundations. Those huge, beautiful and startling green eyes, which had flown open when they had met his own equally shocked eyes had trapped him in their gaze. The air had been filled suddenly with the most exotic and heady perfume which had beguiled and bewitched his reeling senses, and Cadwy's world seemed to sway alarmingly before vanishing away completely. The two of them could have been alone on top of a silent and mist wreathed mountain not in a packed and seething breakfast hall, and this electric connection had lasted a mere fraction of an instant, but it must have seemed to them both as though the earth itself had stopped turning. That cataclysmic moment had stretched achingly, and they had both been completely caught up in it as if suspended somehow by a druiden's powerful spell. Like a 'doe in the knock', that vision of loveliness had hovered on her tiptoes, her shocked eyes locked onto his, and it was like a physical blow to his senses. Standing poised, frozen like a deer

spotting the hunter in that fleeting moment before flight, it had been the life changing moment when their two worlds had collided headlong, and nothing would ever be the same again. At that sparking, cataclysmic point in time Cadwy's throat had turned to ash, and he had felt a kind of mushrooming panic grow inside him like nothing he had ever experienced before. His spirit had soared flushing his neck pink in a treacherous display, but that flame haired Goddess had come off her tiptoes then and had passed him by. She had floated away like a cloud of fragrant white silk, and it had been like the sun going in. Her demeanour had changed too in that instant from one that mirrored his sudden and shocking, almost painfully overwhelming physical attraction, to an abrupt and dismissive return to a supreme coolness and a feminine poise. For Cadwy, the world had zoomed back into focus in that instant and with a sickening lurch, the babbling sounds swelling around him. She had moved away from him then, passing through this dizzying vortex of people like an elegant ghost not giving him a backward glance, and she had torn the beating heart from his chest. Utterly undone where he stood, Cadwy had felt compelled to yell out; 'Don't go!', but his tongue had been dry and truculent, and he could not have uttered even a croak at that devastating moment had his life depended on it. Realising that his mouth hung open, Cadwy had snapped it shut with a dry click of his teeth. 'Do something you idiot!' He had yelled wordlessly at himself; rooted. 'She wouldn't soil her feet with you.' Had come the response from the little voice of doubt in his head. His mind had reeled, and his heart had hammered against his chest as that vision of loveliness vanished into the crowd. Cadwy had realised with a rush of hot blood that everyone was looking at him. In fact, he had been surrounded by hundreds of wide-eyed females, and Cadwy had dropped his gaze, slumping into the armchair and forcing himself to focus on the fiery depths of the adjacent hearth in an attempt at regaining his wits. Staring into the flames for long moments, Cadwy's face had glowed and not just from the heat, but he had finally been able to breathe again. The loud hubbub and the usual noise of the crowd in that hall had risen noticeably, and Cadwy had been unsure whether there had been utter

silence in the preceding moments or if he had just tuned out the noise and was only hearing it again at that sickening moment, but he had felt dizzy and flushed, and so kept his head down, sucking in the perfumed air.

“Are you well Cadwy?” Lady Meleri had asked him casually from her chair, and Cadwy had forced himself to nod to his hênmodryb, controlling his breathing, but he had not been able meet her eyes as his mind had been in turmoil still and his heart had galloped on without pause.

“Lovely isn’t she!” Lady Meleri had added quietly, and as if in careless afterthought.

Cadwy’s blue eyes had flicked upwards to meet his great aunt’s at that startling moment, and the hunting alarm had gone off in the back of his head for some reason. There had been something about the vaguely feline expression of that great lady and in that instant which had unnerved him, sitting there opposite him happily munching on a soft bread roll with that unsettling smile on her unreadable face. She had held out the wicker basket absently but with a wholly unconvincing, innocent look on her round face that he would never forget.

“Bara?” The enigmatic smile had remained.

Cadwy had taken a soft roll with a nod but had grabbed his log of honeyed half-ale from the low table and took a long slurp of the sweetened beer, unlocking his grateful throat. It had dawned on him then that there was something going on in Gŵyr Huw’s dining hall that he knew nothing about. Cadwy had looked at his great aunt again but more carefully, as the instinctive alarm had still tingled worryingly.

“Who is she?” He had managed to utter without too much loss of face, but he had not liked the amused look on Lady Meleri’s face at that moment. The same moment he could have sworn that he had heard the faint but familiar *clang* of a spring-loaded bear trap snapping shut somewhere in the grounds outside, but then it may have been his suddenly feverish imagination.

“That Cadwy bach, is the honourable Princess Eirwen ferch Ederus of the House Galedon. Great King Ederus’ daughter and currently a student of mine at Côr Ynys Gwyn.” She had told him this quietly, watching him carefully.

Cadwy had heard the words like sweet music in his ears; SHE had a name he could hang his heart on! ‘Princess Eirwen of Galedon’, and a strange warm feeling had glowed inside him as he had spoken her name in his mind for the first time. Snapping quickly out of the daydream however he had met his great aunt’s eyes again, and which seemed to have penetrated his very soul at that enlightening moment. He had not forgotten just who that feeble looking, elderly woman sitting opposite him was. With her silks and beautiful mantles and bejewelled brooches and her ever present appendage; the silver-handled walking cane a fool could have thought her feeble. Lady Meleri was anything but, and that impressive lady was one of the three most accomplished and revered, senior druidens in all Prydein, and her power, influence and her stature were immense. Her gaze had been unnerving that morning however, and Cadwy had felt himself wilting before it spiritually, but then suddenly it was gone in an instant. It was as if his great aunt had felt the shift in his mood and relented, withdrawing her fearsome probing.

“She’s not Gods’-sworn is she!” Cadwy had blurted this out loudly and out of the blue, standing up and knocking the basket of bread flying as the appalling thought had hit him like a slap across the face.

Meleri had put her hand to her mouth at this outburst and began trembling visibly. Cadwy had been suddenly alarmed that he had caused her insult or injury, until realising with a shock that she had been laughing; laughing at him! Blushing to his roots then, Cadwy had looked around himself sheepishly, realising just how loudly he had blurted those words out. He had drawn a lot of attention once more it seemed, but that had not fazed him, at least *she* had not been around to hear his all-too revealing outburst; the honourable, beautiful and fragrant, Princess

Eirwen of Galedon. *Thump*, there had been that strange, weak but warm feeling again as his stomach flipped, and his pulse had quickened a little along with his breathing. His mind had still whirled in a kaleidoscopic vision of bright emerald green and deep copper-auburn as he stood there tense among the tables, focussing on his breathing and waiting for the worst of news.

“No Cadwy, she is not Gods’ sworn.” Meleri had answered him plainly, ending his agony and with her mirth suppressed admirably for that moment. Ddugesi Meleri had composed herself completely by the time Cadwy had resumed his seat, and where he kept his eyes lowered, supped his morning ale and learned on the hoof precisely when he should keep his mouth shut.

“She is a beautiful girl and I know her well Cadwy. Her beauty goes all the way through too, from mind to heart and to her soul. I would like to discuss Princess Eirwen with you Cadwy, it is why you are here.” She had told him steadily, again watching his face carefully but without any mind intrusion.

They had discussed that pivotal moment often in the following days and evenings around their home hearth. The initial lightning flash of their mind-meet at that shocking point of eye contact was completely unexpected, and it had thrilled Meleri to the core, for she had known that the true power in life itself is locked up in this rare and elemental spark of human attraction. It comes when two people are hit with the same *Thunderbolt of Cythera*, and it is a force as old as man himself. It had been that way for her, so many years ago and when Meleri had met her lord husband to be. It was on those recent, quiet and intimate nights of long discussion since their return that Cadwy had been shown all of Meleri’s vision, and he had been amazed. The initial foray into a proposed and arranged royal marriage, one which could unite the great northern kingdoms of Albion and Galedon into an immense and unconquerable northern federation was a pure longshot. At that stage merely an opening

gambit and one with incredibly long odds. Meleri's plan was a tentative but ground-breaking first move in a well-thought-out campaign, but one based on ancient rules and traditions which were dubious and long forgotten at best. A regal handfasting between such elevated and popular royal personages would attract kings, queens and nobles from across the known world if achieved however, and it could transform and inspire all northern Prydein as the Brythons are ever romantics. Meleri's connection to her Gods was strong however, and that grand lady knew of an impending calamity, one which had been prophesied by her senior uati several times. Utterly secret to all outside the priesthood and the senior aristocracy of Prydein, this future catastrophe was one which could destroy all northern Prydein if she failed to bring together its two most powerful federations in time and was unsuccessful in forging this highly improbable, first-ever alliance between confirmed old enemy nations. Meleri knew in her heart that if that stark and terrifying prophecy came true, the north would have to unite to withstand this dreadful threat of invasion, annihilation and displacement however ethereal and foreseen. Meleri had known too that King Ederus would be the trickiest part in the whole puzzle-like equation, as the old fool had already made one poor decision in that regard long ago. Galedon and Albion had made war on each other on countless occasions in the past and to much begrudged loss of life on both sides, and this was by far the biggest barrier to any success in this entirely risky venture. Songs and englyns have been sung for generations about these conflicts on both sides of the great divide, and the warriors who died in them are still remembered and honoured to this day. So, Meleri's fantastical plan was dependant on cutting through decades of deeply entrenched fear, overwhelming suspicion and an unshakeable hatred. No painless undertaking even for someone of her power and influence.

In her considered and oft-stated opinion, the *Thunderbolt of Cythera* was a wonderful thing, but it often got in the way of arranged marriages one way or another. Back at DunEil, Cadwy's father's capital however, Lady

Meleri had admitted to a strange and warm feeling about that momentous happening in Huw's dining hall. Her confidence in the highly unlikely was renewed by it and her commitment to her nephew's improbable but entirely possible betrothal became intractable. Despite the huge cultural and emotional obstacles dividing these two confirmed *old enemy* nations, she had been unexpectedly optimistic for her greater and undisclosed mission. Recalling that morning when she had looked around at the sullen faces of the young ladies in that hall, most of their sad eyes had still been focused on Cadwy, and she had chuckled to herself. Not one girl in that great hall had missed the cataclysmic spark that had passed between those two young aristocrats, and the hall had been filled with broken female hearts from that moment, and the boy did not have a clue. If Cadwy had been aware of the situation around him that morning he would have been mortified and so much could have gone wrong, but Cythera's eternal power could not be turned, and neither could fate.

"We're probably going to see the Gadwyr for ourselves Cadwy, if what we hear about Julius Caesar is true. We will all soon be going to war if he invades, only this time together!" Hefin broke the daydream with his direct pragmatism, voicing the current concern of their nations. Cadwy nodded thoughtfully in response to this and as he put away his emotions, his dreams and his longed-for future, his eyes refocusing as he woke up a little. He picked up another butter cake from the bed with a wince and a slight shift in position from the continued protest of his damaged ribs.

"Mm, I know Hef, if the rumoured alliance takes place we shall of course be involved. You and I will both be in the van of Albion's host!" Cadwy declared with a wolfish grin.

"Yay, that should be exciting!" Hefin responded with little conviction, his young face flushing at the thought.

* * * * *

King Ederus spurred Caddogddu on toward the clearing ahead of them and alongside the northern end of this great crescent of rock they had circumvented. It could not be more than a couple of hundred *reeds* now to where these invaders lay, as the rocky northern coastline above the waters of Loch Linne showed ahead once more as a jagged line on the ground ahead, and with the snow-covered heights of Pen Neweis towering in the far distance it made a memorable sight. Suddenly a great roar went up, the clamouring voices of thousands of men enjoined in unseen battle and the unmistakeable *thump-thump-clang* of armed combat. Ederus spurred Caddogddu again and the stallion responded, eager to join this still unseen but clearly explosive fray. The lords galloped across these coastal flats behind him and wheeled to their right around this great rock they had traversed, and there before them lay the fight, which had already been taken to the enemy as the mighty Gadwyr paused for nothing and no man. The Iweriu and Western Islanders alike were amassed in a great human wedge at the northern limit of this peninsula and at a place known around here as *the narrows*, and they were attempting to cross the long rope and timber bridge that was suspended across the Lefan and at this pinch point in the land here, obviously to gain the opposite peninsula and to assault the now crowded ramparts of DunBalla in the distance. To where, the women and children of Morfen had surely fled with their lives and their meagre possessions. The snow laden foothills of Pen Neweis behind them bore witness as did that glorious mount, its sacred peak now vanishing into the cloud filled heavens, and the scene was set for disaster. A few hundred warriors had already crossed over to the other side of that slatted rope bridge, and a few of those enemy warriors still on it started to sway their way back across it to support their host. There were many hundreds of warriors caught in this flat land, trapped between the adjacent mountain and the drop over that cliffside, down to the jagged rocks and the cold waters of Loch Lefan almost a hundred feet below. Another hour would have seen them all across to the opposite peninsula and DunBalla would be under siege, and these invaders would have easily swamped the poor defences of that low

dun and killed all within. They would have had plenty of time to consolidate and bolster that fallen dun, and then to hold out grimly for their reinforcements to cross slowly, two abreast and only in companies of twelve and no more at once due to the width and weight restriction of that perilous bridge's construction. Cutting that rope bridge down behind them would surely have sealed their success of this day and prevented any pursuit from the Galedonians. Ederus' task would then have been made almost impossibly difficult, requiring more of his army and his division of engineers to be brought up to this northwestern extreme and it would have taken weeks. That low hillfort was just discernible on the misty land opposite and as a dark bump at the foot of those towering, snow laden foothills behind it. Should all those invaders have been allowed to cross, Ederus' ad-hoc battle strategy would have been in ruins. Speed had saved the day so far, and the moving mass of filthy looking men on this broad maes before him were dressed in an assortment of rags, woollen mantles and scraps of fur, and they were now roaring their own battle cries in response to his arrival. The main body of this enemy was shuffling steadily inland now to hastily given orders as they were in a hazardous position, amassed against the clifftop. The major, landward mass and the rear ranks of these invading warriors had tried to throw up a quick shield wall on seeing the monstrous Gadwyr come around the corner at the run, with a razor-sharp battle axe in each hand and their heavy bronze amulets glinting, but these swift and silent Gadwyr had caught them napping. Eight hundred musclebound members of the most feared strike force in Prydein had torn into their undefended rear and its left flank, slaughtering dozens of them with their spinning axes before they were able to respond as a body. A shield wall was eventually thrown up, and it was now being supported by more and more Western and Iweriuan warriors as they recovered from the shock and began to organise themselves. The Gadwyr were battling away at these now frontal ranks of shield bearing warriors, who were trying to hold these ferocious giants back long enough for their comrades to move back from the cliffs behind them lest they become trapped and driven over them. Those wild and monstrously huge

Galedonians must have seemed to have appeared from nowhere to this invading host, and the horrifying advantage of their surprise attack was now evident. The Gadwyr were outnumbered by about four to one from the onset, but none of that mattered, as those unique individuals were completely lost to the joyous battle madness of GrutArd; their terrible God of war. At that precise moment, the six hundred thundering horse lord warriors of the Epidiau swept around the far side of this cleft mountain and in a momentous cloud of dust. They fanned out quickly into two formations behind the still forming enemy ranks, and their lances were like a moving forest in the distance.

Captain Sel quickly assessed the situation ahead, and it was just as predicted by the druids. This bedraggled enemy horde was pushing back from the coastline and the slatted footbridge, back toward the foot of this horseshoe shaped mountain from fear of being trapped and pushed over those sheer cliffs no doubt. Captain Sel held out his right arm, and the front *alau* of cavalry uncouched their lances and held them aloft, and they trotted close to this cliffside in a wedge formation and to further promote this inland movement of their enemy. The second *alau* of three hundred horsemen fanned out in a line of containment across this ground and to their left flank, moving forward at the same easy pace. Sel waited for the right moment as they approached the rear of this great battle, as normally he would have just charged into the back of them without hesitation, but he wanted their formation to begin breaking down first, so that the eight hundred outnumbered Gadwyr behind would sooner benefit. When they were about sixty reeds away, he noticed some panicky gesturing from the nearest and rearmost ranks of this great shuffling wall of men ahead as they saw his cavalry approaching their unprotected backs. The rearmost ranks began to turn to face this new threat, and the structure and efficiency of that human wall ahead began to lose its form. Ederus and the gŵyrd of Galedon thundered around the corner in the distance and it was at that moment that Sel threw up his arm, straight up in the air, and as one his cavalry charged. There was a great metallic *swoosh* as three hundred long and leaf-shaped cavalry swords were drawn by the second

alau, and the air was rent by the enormous roar of 'Epona!' from them all. This infamous warcry erupted from all these Epidian horsemen as they lowered their lances and raised their swords, and amid the rolling thunder of their chargers' great hooves, they charged headlong into battle and into Prydeinig history.

In response to this imminent assault, the rear ranks of this huge body of trapped enemy warriors began to shift and to lose its form. One big man roared at them to stand, and he was supported by other veterans who screamed their defiance, and their seasoned men began to square off and to lock shields, but there were far more fishermen, crofters and farmers among them than trained warriors, and *they* did not stand. As brave and as reckless as they were, they could not stand, and these surrounded men were suddenly galvanised by absolute terror. They surged away from the thundering death approaching their backs at such blistering pace, deserting their lines and rushing toward the false promise of sanctuary offered by the valley carving its way into of that mountain to the left of them. Mindlessly, they disengaged from their shield wall to flee the certain death of being ridden over these cliffs to their right, and they completely undermined their comrades who were still battling the ferocious Gadwyr to the front. This uncontrollable panic flashed through the civilian men among this horde like snake venom, and all semblance of orderly defence vanished with them along with their courage. Their shield wall crumbled hopelessly behind them and then it broke. Men fell over each other, cursing and screaming and mindlessly trampling their comrades underfoot in this panicked retreat, as only an organised and well locked shield wall can turn the charge of horses. So, the Epidian cavalry cleaved into these fleeing enemy without check, their lances tearing shrieks of mortal agony from the cowardly, the unlucky and the slow alike. From the far side, a distant Ederus had led his regal retinue to battle toward the *bridge* end of this shifting and crumbling shield wall, and the fearsome king of Galedon could be heard roaring his battlecry.

"Camulo and Galedon!" Ederus bellowed, drawing his great sword.

The glorious Fwlch-iâ exploded into sunlight with an awe-inspiring flash of cold brilliance, and his lords galloping beside him did the same, drawing their honed and polished, *heirloom* swords. There were a few Gadwyr down in the central space vacated by that suddenly disorganised shield wall and as the remaining enemy veterans had retreated steadily from the ferocious, unending assault of those enraged highland warriors. Each fallen Gadwyr was surrounded by a ring of many slain *gelyn*, as each one of their lives had clearly come at a lord's ransom. The thumping of their great axes on the shields and heads of the men in front of them was an irregular rhythm now but done at a great tempo still. As the lords of Galedon charged toward this battle, Ederus spotted in the distance a big bull of a man standing on a rock in a sleeveless coat of brown bear fur and wielding a huge, two-headed war axe. This obvious leader had numerous iron and gold rings about his thick arms and his fingers, and he was yelling and pointing, and men were running to his bidding. Ederus fixed this warrior in his eye as he wore a golden and twisted wire crown, perhaps that of the Iweriuan King Conair Môr and so he rode directly toward this huge man. As if from some sixth's sense, this invading ruler looked across the spread of snowy ground between them and seemed to gaze directly at Ederus as he galloped toward him. Ederus lifted Fwlch-iâ to point it directly at this broad warrior king, leaving no doubt as to his intentions, just as Caddogddu crashed into the last few shields on the lefthand end of this ragged wall, sending three men flying backwards. Ederus was thrown forward by this impact but kept his balance easily, slashing to his right and topping an enemy spearman's head like a hard-boiled egg, feeling the hot splash of the man's blood and brains on his face as he fell at his horse's feet. As Sel's Epidian cavalry crashed loudly into the enemy from behind, mercilessly scything into them and throwing their rear ranks into screaming disarray, Ederus, his lords and the indefatigable Gadwyr shattered their more obstinate and experienced front ranks.

Ederus spat his first victim's metallic tasting gore from his mouth, and he dragged the reins to his left quickly to prevent Caddogddu attacking the

nearest enemy ranks to their right with his teeth as was his habit in battle, and as he had a more important task for them both. Using the unequalled Epidian hinged bit with its longer reins gripped tightly in his left shield-bearing hand and which allowed a full range of defensive movement without damaging the mouth of his beloved horse, Ederus wheeled smartly a quarter-turn to his left. To the deadly drumbeat of the incensed Gadwyr and to the screams of men impaled on cavalry lances ringing in his ears, Ederus spurred Caddogddu, and they headed away from the bedlam, charging straight for that Iweriuan king and the ring of huge, axe-wielding mountain men that surrounded the rock he stood on and who were clearly his personal guard. Ederus looked about himself quickly, trying to identify the slightly different clothing of the Western Islanders and ultimately that of one Brude Bredus, but all these men were Iweriu, and he put the thought from his mind, cutting right and left with deadly accuracy, Fwlch-iâ killing two more enemy in quick succession. A glance to his right told him that the spearmen of the Fachomagiau were now also engaged, and the sound of clashing steel was like a thousand crazed blacksmiths in frantic competition. Ederus parried a well-thrown spear from his left with his shield but kept his pace, and Prince Galan suddenly appeared at the gallop to his right hand. Young Gallorc came up on Ederus' left, also matching his pace and sporting his unusual and highly polished helmet with its contoured steel and inhuman looking skull mask. They both had long, wickedly sharp lances outstretched and Ederus caught on to their tactic immediately and eased his great horse, just enough for his two brave allies to draw ahead by half a length and to close their lances in front of him.

No men could withstand this onslaught without being in a tightly locked shield wall, and this Galedonian royal trio hit the phalanx of enemy axemen like a wedged mallet, both lances hitting home with shocking impacts, sprawling this group of big men and killing three of them instantly. These three screaming horses and their enraged riders had crashed into the guard knocking them over like skittles, and Ederus took a standing man to his left with a quick but fatal overhead cut to his skull,

covering Gallorc long enough to let him drop the broken lance and to clear his blade. This instinctive action to protect his young comrade almost cost Ederus his own life, as at that same moment the huge Iweriuan king leapt from his rock, swinging his great battle axe around to remove his head. In thoughtless response, Ederus twisted in the saddle at the last second and threw his head and his torso away from the deadly flash of that blade, but the tip of his enemy's huge axe blade caught the armour-plated pad over his left shoulder, and it snagged. It was as if a great hook had plucked him from his horse, and the king of Galedon was unceremoniously unseated sideways and backwards, to fall hard to the ground and with a crash that knocked all the breath out of him. The helmeted back of his head hit the frozen ground and bounced, Fwlch-iâ and his shining shield flying from unfeeling fingers.

Ederus' head swam and bright little lights were popping in his vision as he tried to rise, but a huge shadow suddenly loomed over him. Ederus instinctively rolled to his left as with a *crash*, an enormous axe struck a huge gouge in the snowy earth he had just vacated. Looking around for his sword, Ederus felt the laughter of disbelief well up in him and spangling lights began to dance in front of his eyes as he fought for awareness and for his life. He spotted Fwlch-iâ in the snow to his right, past the huge gouge in the ground made by this man's enormous axe, but his focus was snapped back upwards and Ederus saw his own death right there before him, as the gigantic Iweriuan King Conair Môr loomed over him again. Shimmering in Ederus' vision like some monstrous chimera, a savage rage contorted this invading king's ruddy face, and he raised the war axe over his head again for the killing stroke. Spittle flew from his thick and ragged lips as he roared his guttural battlecry over him. With a whistling in his ears dominating all other sound, Ederus went for his dagger with his right hand and reached for the handle of his shield with the other, but it was like a childhood dream with terror at his heels and where all movement was held fast by the cloying, dragging terror of running in quicksand. Ederus knew in his thudding heart that he would never make it, and he looked up now with his senses swimming and

disbelief blooming massive once more. The filthy, bearded and deeply freckled face of this man exulted, baring his stained teeth in anticipation. As Conair Môr began the huge and fatal, downward cut which would end his life, Ederus looked on in complete amazement, as the Iweriuan king was suddenly blown away. In front of his slightly unfocused, disbelieving eyes and with a muted *crash*, that Iweriuan king was sent cartwheeling away to Ederus' left like a broken scarecrow. That huge man had been smashed into oblivion and thrown through the air like a shattered ragdoll by the crushing, colossal impact of an enraged black stallion, and it was decisive. Conair Môr's double headed battle axe spun high up into the air and Ederus was mesmerised, as with a detached and unfocused gaze he watched it spiral and fall, to *thump* onto the now empty ground before him. Caddogddu screamed his rage as he sent the man flying, but not before he had taken a savage bite out of the man's face, and he reared now and flailed his great killing hooves, still screaming in further protection of his master.

Ederus shook his head and groggily picked up his long sword from its matching outline in the snow, wiping the bloodied blade clumsily on his bracs. The king of Galedon lurched around until he was in a position to grab his shield, and stooping to pick it up, he shook his head as there was a peculiar sound whistling around in it at that moment. Caddogddu had calmed, and Ederus tried to hang his strangely heavy shield back on the pommel of his saddle, but he made three failed attempts as his vision swam and he found that his coordination was askew. It slowly dawned on him that he would need both hands, and so he looked blearily at the sword in his right hand, wondering what on earth he was going to do with it. Whilst he swayed gently on his feet it took him a few moments to decide, and then Ederus stuck the sword in the ground and grabbed the shield with both hands before trying again to hook it on his saddle. The childhood game of 'pin the tail on the pig' floated back from his reeling memory and the laughter of disbelief reared its sceptical head once more, but Ederus persevered, and slowly, moment by moment he began to feel a little better. Once the shield was secure, he reclaimed the sword and

staggered around his horse to throw his left arm over Caddogddu's saddle, supporting himself as his head and his vision began to clear. Pulling the dented armour back down into place Ederus flexed his neck, feeling the stiffness creeping in as he groggily looked around himself. Conair Môr's guards were all slain, and their king lay dead on the ground beside them with his head at a strange angle and with a huge crescent flap of torn and bloody skin hanging from one cheek, the cheekbone protruding and gleaming wetly through the blood. It was clear that his marvellous stallion had broken the man's neck with his charge, hitting him squarely with the padded bronze plate on his broad chest, just as he had been trained to do. The plate was now dented from the huge collision, and Ederus patted his rump fondly.

"My wonderful Caddogddu, my life is yours and I honour you!" He mumbled, still clinging to the seat of the saddle. As his head cleared, he saw that although the fighting still raged, the day was his. These invaders had been cut down by both the Gadwyr and the cavalry of the Epidiau, and the survivors had made the mistake the druids had predicted and Ederus had hoped they would. The enemy were now retreating into the mouth of this great horseshoe shaped mountain before them all and certainly sealing their doom, as there was no escape from it. As their fleeing comrades retreated into it, a few enemy crawled around on the battleground of its apron with various injuries, but there was no fight left in these hundreds of dead and dying warriors. A dour skirmish line of Gallorc's spearmen was walking carefully between these heaped rows of bodies, pulling out their allies before dispatching those enemy either still clinging to life or playing dead. None escaped their cold scrutiny, and the sharp spears of Fachomagia rose and fell, spraying fresh blood to the sullied and churned up snow of this battlefield with each bold and vengeful stroke.

Ederus shook his head again to clear the wooliness and reaffirmed his grip on Fwlch-iâ, feeling its enervating power flow back into him. Taking three, vaguely unsteady paces to the fallen king, Ederus swung Fwlch-iâ

purposefully overhead and chopped into the thickly muscled but broken neck, making a poor stroke of it. He cut again and again, until the head rolled to one side, and thick blood poured sluggishly from the jagged broken bones and the ragged stump of the shattered neck. Ederus managed to pick up the severed head of Conair Môr by a hank of dirty, rust coloured hair and went to leave, but spotted the twisted gold wire of his crown still lying in the muddy snow. Stooping unsteadily once more to collect this golden prize, Ederus threaded a matted hank of hair through the crown, letting the gold wire hoop fall back to the head. Returning to Caddogddu, he tied this bloodied head with its torn face around a special ring set into the leather strap at the horse's neck for just this purpose. He used Conair Môr's own coarse umber hair, concentrating on making the knot with a leather lace around it slowly and deliberately as if he were drunk. Standing straight from this task, he took a series of deep breaths, holding each for the count of three, and in a few minutes his head started to clear a little more and the *spangly* lights finally abate. Ederus took one more deep breath and looked at Conair Môr's savage face of death hanging from his horse. Although he had never met the man, he nodded with satisfaction at his death, and with a terse grin tightening his mouth, Ederus spat to the ground and looked around his battlefield again. This time he was assessing this littered field of combat around him, looking once again for evidence of western islanders and of one Brude Bredus. The only enemy who remained on this devastated field of combat were those fierce gelyn who knew not how to surrender. Any form of capitulation was just not in them and so they fought to the death, in small groups of fighters and individual battles of single combat. However, there were no rules to bind the allied warriors this day who had all been given instruction by the priesthood, and so the enemy were cut down from the side or from behind, even when engaged with another warrior in single combat. In sacred wars between the tribes this would have been unthinkable, but these were foreign invaders bent on land theft, rape and murder and so were shown no respect and even less mercy. The air was rent by the screaming of the stubbornly injured and the dying and the

stench of death filled Ederus' nostrils, but now at least the great din of battle had changed completely from the rhythmic thumping of a shield wall struggle to the unsyncopated crashing of independent pockets of fighting. Surveying the area around him again now and with a broader focus, Ederus realised that the druids and uati had been proved accurate and their bold plan had worked. With the immediate threat of being forced off those cliffs, these *gelyn* had taken the only option left open to them; the mistaken protection of the flat bottomed, dead ended valley in the heart of that mountain. They were effectively trapped now and by their own cowardice, and Ederus stepped around Caddogddu to inspect him more closely but still keeping one hand on the horse to steady himself. Happy his brave warhorse was unhurt, he led him by the reins over the litter of fallen enemy and with sword at the ready when he was suddenly brought up short. A wave of sadness broke over him as he spotted the devastated body of young prince Gallorc lying in the cold, blood spattered and snow trampled ground before him. He had been torn from neck to waist by some enormous weapon, and his heartbroken horse with its head hanging stood a sorrowful guard over him.

"Your majesty!" Came a nearby shout, and Ederus tore his eyes away to see Galan on foot, holding his left arm and trying to staunch a wound which was bleeding profusely.

"Galan!" Ederus breathed, relieved at seeing the prince although clearly injured, very much alive.

"You are injured lord king!" Galan looked at his face in horror and Ederus frowned, wiping his beard and face, and his sleeve came away smeared with congealing blood and brain matter, reminding him of Fwlch-iâ's first kill of the day.

"Not my blood Galan, but that is most definitely yours my loyal friend." Ederus replied gruffly, quickly tearing a sleeve from his linen undershirt and helping Galan to bind up his arm.

"It is a cruel shame my lord king, he was so brave but so young!" Galan was sobbing, looking down at the broken and blood splattered body of their fallen young compatriot.

"War is a terrible thing Galan, in spite of the glory and the ecstasy of battle, friends and loved ones are always lost whatever the outcome, something none of us should ever forget. Young Gallorc will have the pyre of a king though for he fought like one today!" Ederus said sadly, bending to collect the shield, the long sword and the beautiful skull mask helmet from the prince's body on the hard packed snow with its superbly crafted silver skull face and which was miraculously unscathed. Gallorc's arms would be returned to the Fachomagiau and would doubtless be cherished for eternity. Ignorant yet of their great loss this day, this fallen young prince's spearmen now took the lead, leaving many exhausted Gadwyr recovering on the ground. Unaware of their beloved prince's demise, these doughty warriors marched into that mountain valley shoulder to shoulder and in a long line. At least three ranks deep, they moved in on these invaders, who were amassing at the far end of this valley and with nowhere else to go. As this battle and the entire invasion was obviously now a crushing and comprehensive Brythonic victory, and in stark comparison to what had come before, an eerie silence settled on this torn battlefield. This peculiar stillness was shattered rudely, and by a raucous calling from high above.

Ederus was transfixed by these recently arrived and circling buzzards, distaste twisting his lips as he watched them kiting on the high wind above this torn battlefield and eagerly awaiting their feast. 'How did they know?' he considered absently, but a loud crack drew his attention from the busy skies above him, and Ederus turned to see the rope and timber bridge thrown across *the narrows* fall into the canyon below. The small force of warriors which had already crossed had stayed put rather than rushing back to help their comrades, and they were crowded around that distant pair of bridge posts now in a formless mass, but an untouchable one. Seeing that their allied endeavour was irretrievably lost, those men

had finally hacked down the bridge and clearly so that no one could follow them directly. Ederus now saw where the Western Islanders had been lurking, and one man stood between those distant posts to where the bridge had once been attached. He was a big man, and although Ederus could not make him out clearly, he was sure that he was looking at one Brude Bredus, the man he had sworn to kill this day. Ederus cursed his oversight then and spat to the snow, knowing that he should have sent warriors to pursue these men but more importantly, to secure that bridge. That huge but distant man held up a long sword as if in smug adieu, before he turned and led his small warband away at a trot. At least their plans had been scuppered, and there was no way those few warriors could even threaten the locals crowded on the hill of DunBalla now, who were no doubt huddled behind their slingshot cairns of river pebbles in readiness. So, Ederus knew they would flee. He knew they would run, almost certainly to somewhere on the deeply convoluted western coast in search of boats to steal and to make their escape in. Looking around himself now at the body littered and blood-soaked ground and at the smattering of fighting that was still ongoing, Ederus again spat his frustration out. He spotted the huge form of Nêr Brith Fawr binding the leg of a fallen comrade and hailed him, taking his shield from the pommel and waving it in the air and twisting it so that it flashed brightly. The Gadwyr chief caught this signal and came over at a trot to bow deeply before him.

“Lord king you are injured!” The man pointed with concern, and Ederus grinned wolfishly in response as he rehung his shield on the saddle hook without thought.

“Not my brains Brith, an Iweriuan dog’s!” He growled, causing Brith to grin back at him, making him somehow look even more dangerous.

“Honourable Nêr Brith, I thank you and your courageous Gadwyr for the service you have done me and the Galedon alliance this day.” Ederus praised and thanked him formally, offering his hand. The enormous man looked surprised at this offer and stood, approaching carefully. A gnarled and huge hand like the paw of a man-bear gripped Ederus’ formed with

cables that felt like steel wire under the pale and freckled, leathery skin. This powerful hand was covered in coarse red hair, emerging through a lurid blue whorl of tattoo like fur and it enveloped his, making his own look like the hand of a child.

“The honour is all ours great King Ederus, that you entrusted us with this crucial endeavour has praised our God, sent those of us who had lived too long to the Underworld, and blooded our young. Your name will be honoured and celebrated at DunTarwddu great lord, for eternity!” Brith rumbled seriously in his deep voice, releasing his grip and bowing again as he backed away a few paces.

Ederus was filled with admiration and pride for this awesome man and all his revered, astonishing soldiers but he had more work for them yet. The priesthood wanted the western islanders caught at all and any cost due to some wild prophecy, but it was far more personal for Ederus. These unscrupulous scum had invaded his lands and had killed his defenceless people, and regardless of the priesthood’s demands, Ederus was filled with a vengeful hatred toward these people who so dared threaten him and his federation.

“The western islanders have escaped us Nêr Brith, including their leader Brude Bredus, and I swore to HênDdu that we would drink wine from his skull today for this shameful affront!” Ederus told him, his anger and frustration bubbling up at his own words, and he could not help but steal another sharp glance at that now abandoned shoreline over the water.

“You need only give the word great king!” Nêr Brith stated bluntly, his face becoming animated at the anticipation of more opportunity for glory.

Ederus pointed to the peninsula of land to his right and to other side of the Loch Lefan gorge, and to the empty space where the rope bridge had stretched between these two pieces of land known as ‘the narrows’, all overlooked by the majestic heights of Pen Neweis rising in the distance, vanishing now into bruised low cloud.

“He and around three hundred of his warriors have escaped to the Neweis peninsula before cutting down the bridge. They are too few to lay siege to DunBalla now and must flee to the coast in search of escape. To catch them Brith, your men will have to run almost to the foot of Arglwydd Neweis herself, before looping over to the west and then south down the *glen of the narrows* and back toward us before picking up their western spoor if there is any hope of bringing them to my justice. They are surely seeking to steal boats to allow them to escape to their island strongholds, somewhere along that western coastline.” Ederus pointed more to his front and over the great Linn, outlining the improbable task, even impossible in most circumstances. However, he had the Gadwyr to call on now and this made it not only possible it made it eminently achievable, but only if they started immediately, and the very same thought was presenting itself to this huge northern nêr. Brith looked around to the north, assessing those black clouds that were looming in the distance behind Ederus, knowing they brought mountains of snow and would make the task he demanded that much more precarious and unlikely. Ederus turned in the saddle to follow his studied gaze, and he too saw the black anvil of the oncoming storm slowly billowing up and around Pen Neweis like a dark cloak, making his spirits drop.

“It looks as though we may have to wait for a future opportunity to catch up with Brude Bredus and his group of murderous thieves Brith, as there is much snow coming.” Ederus said flatly, his shoulders sagging.

“We bathe in fresh snow majesty in the heart of winter, and our women bathe our babies in the same.” Brith growled. “We will catch these vermin before sunrise and send them across the bridge of swords to Lug with your name ringing in their ears great lord!” He added eagerly, clearly relishing this onerous challenge. Where most mortal men lay exhausted and done for the day, Nêr Brith Fawr still looked fresh and eager, and Ederus’ heart swelled with pride at these words, and his spirit soared to the heavens once more. “But we need to go now lord, so with your

blessings.” This impossibly huge man added in his subterranean rumble, bowing briefly and turning on his heel without waiting.

“Bring me his head Nêr Brith and I will put a big bag of gold in your hands!” Ederus shouted after him in joy and as the Gadwyr chieftain ran to rally a group of the best of his chosen men. Ederus saw the excitement and eagerness in the eyes and the body language of those amazing warriors, at the prospect of running maybe fifteen miles or more into a Galedon snowstorm to hunt down and kill those fleeing westerners. All this to fulfil the selfish promise of a king made in comfort and safety, before running another fifteen miles back. Ederus felt a twinge of guilt then, but it vanished in an instant as he watched these legendary men prepare themselves for the task with an astonishing relish.

One hundred chosen warriors, the biggest and the very best of the best assembled around their chieftain, who had few words for them before this impressive and elite group formed up, smiling dangerously. These elite Gadwyr began to run northwards toward this building storm and in their loping, sinuous style of running, which carried so much threat and so much physical menace. Their lifelong mantra came to Ederus’ mind then, ‘iron, blood and sacrifice’ and it seemed to sum up these Gadwyr perfectly. Ederus was inspired to honour them, drawing his long and glittering sword.

“GADWYR!” Ederus roared after them, holding Fwlch-iâ high in the air in salute as his monstrous Galedon wardogs vanished into that freezing mist like an army of ghosts. It was a ghostly, thickening mist with claws of ice which had enveloped those warriors, and which crawled ominously toward Ederus now from the frozen heights of that darkening north.

The rattling and banging cludiaid of the priests approached the open mouth of this valley within a mountain and in a cloud of snowy dust. There they drew to a stop, just as Ederus helped Galan remount the Lady Galwena. She was skittish and unsettled at first, but soon calmed when Galan patted her neck and spoke to her soothingly. Ederus dragged himself up onto Caddogddu who stood like a rock while he remounted,

and they headed for the mouth of this horseshoe like mountain ahead of them together, where the unmistakeable sounds of steel on wood, steel on steel and the screams that followed the crunching sound of steel on bone came from. The surviving Iweriuan *scots* were caught like rats in a roofless cave a long way from home, and a great reverberating, mournful sound arose from those warriors like a deep and expressive murmuring. They were trapped in enemy territory with no means of escape, and all saw their doom marching steadily and mercilessly toward them into this canyon. Their lamentations were suddenly overpowered as an ominous looking *skull* banner was unfurled before them and as the warriors of Fachomagiau broke into the opening lines of their famous battle song; 'The valour of Crydon Hîr'. Their strong and harmonising, Brythonic voices soared, echoing around the harsh stone walls of this mountain and drowning out the moans of those trapped within it. At the mouth of this gorge, the many cludiaid of the druid caravan came to a halt and emptied then as if purging their bowels. White gowned priests spilled out from their rear doors and headed directly toward the fighting at the shield wall, which had retreated steadily into this blind gully. Ederus could see that the spearmen of Fachomagia had certainly wet their steel in Iweriuan and Western blood this day, and they had stepped over dozens of dead enemy warriors in their advance, keeping an incessant pressure on this withdrawing mass of slowly shrinking enemy, who had no choice but to keep giving ground. Inevitably there was no more ground to give, as they had reached the back of this enormous and hollow bowl of a mountain in one huge mass. A few panicked men attempted to run up the loose scree slope behind them, but the gradient proved too steep, and they slithered back to the ground in a dusty avalanche of rocks with their fear writ large on their grimy faces. A great shuffling multitude of long haired and bearded warriors remained, and now their backs were truly against the wall, they rallied, and their leaders yelled encouragement as they began to fight again, pushing back with more urgency, but it could not last.

Ederus and Galan led the first alau of Epidian cavalry into the mouth of this closed valley and up behind their Fachomagian allies, so that the

enemy could see them both and his host of mounted warriors behind them. So, they could also see the dripping head of their King Conair Môr bouncing with each step on Caddogddu's muscular shoulder, where it still cast the odd drop of thick Iweriuan royal blood. It looked vaguely comical now, hung with its scruffy knot of dark ginger hair and its ragged and torn cheek, the crown having slipped down over one glazed eye. The Epidiau behind Ederus held their lances upright as they entered this hollow mountain at the walk, and they were as thick as the trees of a forest. This abysmal sight stole away the final vestiges of courage and fight from these trapped gelyn and it crushed them both morally and spiritually. They capitulated then, throwing their arms down and falling to their bare knees in a massed and abject plea for mercy. The druids went berserk, screaming their curses and their insults at them, spitting on these kneeling warriors and dancing with uncontained glee around them at this surrender and at the confirmation of all their essential work in this successful defensive campaign. Amid the bedlam of this religious lunacy, a nêr of the Fachomagiau broke from the ranks and approached the mounted lords. This muscular, capable looking man was dressed smartly in the striking blue and yellow plaid mantle of his House, and it was fixed with his badge of rank; the finely polished and silver brooch of a skull. He approached Ederus and his gŵyrd with the greatest of courtly respect, as the military leadership around his high king had been joined by a large cabal of white gowned priests. This Fachomagian nêr and obviously a champion fell to one knee in front of this august group of lords and priests, awaiting his invitation to speak.

"Stand good nêr and speak freely!" Ederus commanded him easily, and so the warrior stood and spoke directly to him.

"They have thrown down their weapons great king and make a plea for the grace of your mercy lord. What are your orders?" He asked clearly and confidently in his broad northern accent, but he seemed to be looking for someone in this mounted host of lords behind Ederus' and it pained his heart.

“What are you called *nêr*?” Ederus asked him seriously, leaning forward in his saddle.

“I am Prince Gallorc’s *pencampwr*, and I am called *Nêr Gwilym ap Gerus* my liege lord and high king.” The man answered him with a deep bow. Ederus’ pained expression deepened as he considered both the man’s words and his position.

“Your brave Prince Gallorc was slain this day *Gwilym*, and I would have you and your men know that he died bravely at my side when we attacked the *Iweriuan* king.” Ederus told him this gravely and with a deeply melancholic tone, unable to disguise the pain in his own eyes. As the shock of this news showed on the man’s bearded face, a horrified murmur came from his officers in the wings, and it spread quickly. Leaning from his saddle again, Ederus signalled the military squires, and these two awaiting *macwy* stepped forwards formally dressed in their long, dark green jackets and bracs, but with black tabards over their jackets for this sad event. These two squires carried the *Fachomagiau* prince’s shield between them, stepping infinitely slowly and to the sudden onset of a single drum, beating a forlorn heartbeat, heart-breaking tempo. On top of Prince Gallorc’s long and oval cavalry shield were placed his beautiful skull mask helmet, his greaves and his amulets along with his heirloom long sword, now cleaned and safely back in its striking bronze scabbard. This solemn pair of squires bowed deeply and carefully to the distraught *pencampwr*, before presenting him with the shield of their fallen prince and the sacred arms of his House. *Nêr Gwilym* in turn nodded to two of his men, who took these treasured items from the *macwy* with the utmost reverence, tears streaking all their grubby faces.

“His body *Gwilym* is with the druidens, who are preparing his pyre-shroud.” Ederus’ told him quietly, and as the heartbeat drum fell silent, his eyes glittered as they had throughout this tragic but honourable procedure. He sat up in the saddle now and looked around at the tragic faces in the hushed crowd of warriors and priests around him, and the only sound was the sorrowful murmuring coming still from their

vanquished enemy. This shameful sound seemed to cause Ederus' eyes to harden and his anger to resurface. The king of Galedon's chin jutted then as he squared his shoulders, looking once more at the stricken champion before him. "Prince Gallorc ap Casnar, beloved of the loyal and valiant House of Fachomagia, beloved by me and all Galedon gave his life in the defence of our realms this day. He shall be honoured with englyns and songs in my House for all time Pencampwr Gwilym ap Gerus. I want all your men to return to DunAdda with this army tomorrow as royal escort, and so that we can celebrate his heroism and yours together and reward all your efforts of this day." Ederus declared gruffly yet loudly enough for all to hear, but his glittering eyes never left those of the young champion. He turned and nodded to one of these military squires again, who approached him quickly and placed a metal object in his outstretched hand with a bow. "For your courage this day." Ederus resumed loudly and addressing the Fachomagian nêr directly once more. "I make you *Gŵyr* Gwilym ap Gerus, of DunAdar, Fachomagia and of Galedon, and your men too shall all be rewarded for their loyalty this day!" He declared proudly, his eyes still shining with the sentiment.

This dark haired and wiry looking man reacted emotionally to these words, and it was plain he struggled to contain his feelings as he had throughout the heart-breaking return of his prince's arms. Ederus dismounted and called this suddenly elevated soldier forward, personally handing him the solid gold stag brooch of honour before embracing him. Ederus witnessed with a mixture of sadness and pride the proof of how much their prince was loved, especially by his doughty northern soldiers, as the tears coursed down Gŵyr Gwilym and all his men's grubby, bearded and blood-streaked faces. Ederus knew that their privileged prince had always lived among them in the strict and frugal life of a career soldier. Gallorc's champion Gwilym ap Gerus was mortified he had not been at his prince's side but had been under orders to be elsewhere, and so he strove now to equate and mitigate the pain of injustice and the lash of capricious circumstance with this sudden elevation to the nobility and within the embrace of his high king. After a long and emotionally charged moment

the two men parted, and Gŵyr Gwilym came to attention with his eyes swimming before Ederus and all Galedon, and he cleared his throat.

“Great King Ederus ap Ewin you do me, our ancient House and our valiant but fallen Prince Gallorc ap Casnar much honour.” He declared with a tremulous wobble to his voice. This new Gŵyr took a deep breath, and with fresh tears in his eyes, he pressed on but with a firmer voice. “It would be our privilege to escort our lord prince’s body and your royal retinue to DunAdda Majesty, before we then return northeast to our own stronghold, and to hold our own royal funeral services at DunAdar.” The man bowed deeply to Ederus when he had finished speaking.

“What would you do with them *Gŵyr Gwilym*?” Ederus asked him directly and personally, stressing his new title for effect, and looking over the man’s shoulder now at the little over three hundred remaining enemy warriors who were moaning on their knees in the snow and pleading for their lives. Ederus’ eyes shone still as he empathised completely with this soldier, feeling the man’s pain, and he studied the face of this Fachomagian sword master more closely then, seeing too the iron will and the indomitable spirit which had no doubt propelled him to his envious previous position. Ederus nodded, pleased at what he saw and his decision to raise him. He was in the long habit of asking the advice of any new leader he had just appointed as it was just common sense, and today was no different.

“I would give them the land they came to conquer my king, this valley only and let it be theirs for ever! Not one of these lice-ridden vermin should leave here alive!” This noble champion said quietly, but with a vengeful force impossible to ignore and with real steel in his eyes. Ederus held his glittering gaze for a long moment before nodding and turning quickly to remount Caddogddu.

A murmur of agreement came from the Fachomagiau and the nearby cabal of druids, and Ederus looked over to them now, seeking out the tall figure of AurArian and catching his gaze instantly. The brif-druid wore a dazzling collar of gold over the shoulders of his white robe today, riven

with the runes and symbols which bespoke his lofty positions and his status. He spoke in his strange buzzing voice but only so that Ederus could hear, another of his astonishing powers. 'Bring their leaders forward Ederus, from which we will choose the thirty-three that will provide the skulls for the ghost-fence we will erect across this place.' The dread voice spoke in his head and yet the druid's lips never moved, but his eyes blazed in the doing. 'The rest?' He made the unmistakable gesture of drawing a finger across his throat and Ederus nodded in agreement, realising coldly that HênDdu could not have made that signal due to the restriction of that fantastic processional gold cape, and that he had just sent it via thought somehow. He got the distinct impression that the druid had not moved a muscle, and that he had somehow sent that image to him making the throat-slashing gesture through the ether and from mind to mind. He sat up in his saddle now as a superstitious shiver ran down his spine like an icy snake, and he turned back to address all with a loud and clear voice.

"Bring forth their leaders and their weapons!" He commanded, and several Fachomagian soldiers dragged these struggling chosen warriors into a separate, moving ring of sharp steel.

There were thirty-seven of these hirsute or sharp faced, strong looking warriors who were the surviving leaders, and the four smallest of these were returned to their vanquished comrades, on their knees in the snow and awaiting the death they knew to a man and woman was fast approaching. These thirty-three remaining leaders were dragged the two hundred reeds from the mouth of this mountain to the rocky edge overlooking the icy waters of the Linn and there pressed unwillingly to their knees. There were a handful of tough looking females among these scot leaders, but all were forced to watch as their beloved weapons were bent over a knee and discarded into the river below, each accompanied by vengeful curses and taunting laughter. These warriors groaned with the agony of loss and the death of a lifelong wish; to one day cross to the Underworld still gripping his or her beloved long sword. Their hopes and

dreams for *isarno-marwol* were dashed then for eternity as these enemy warriors were neatly decapitated, each head held up by the hair so that in the final blinks of life, he or she could watch their own twitching and headless bodies get unceremoniously booted off this cliff. Thirty-three headless corpses tumbled to the frigid waters below, one by one, spinning and squirting out falling arcs of bright, arterial blood until each made a tremendous splash. Had the tide been out they would have been smashed on the jagged rocks of the foreshore far below, but the witnessing priests were ecstatic nonetheless, dancing in their glee. A dozen men were sent to a nearby wood with axes for the poles, whilst the dripping heads were delivered to more waiting druids, who spoke to each twisted and contorted face, ridiculing and taunting them for many minutes for their failures. Then they fell on them in their frenzy with their glittering eyes and with their razor-sharp blades. First they prised out the glazed eyes of these heads with a 'pop', and then they skinned and scalped these heads with the ease of long practice, before then drawing out the custard yellow brains through the nose cavities with long metal hooks. All the hair, eyes, brains and foul flesh was gleefully gathered by other druids then in wicker baskets and taken away for some other, unknown purpose. These blood-spattered druids then branded each skull with a different and ancient coelbren rune, sizzled into the wet and creamy bone of each glistening forehead with a glowing hot branding iron. These forever condemned skulls were then brought back to the druid's caravan and to Ederus' host in several large jute sacks and all was made ready.

Ederus drained the big horn of mead before throwing the empty cup to a macwy and sitting straighter in his saddle he prepared to address this mass of warriors once more. A heartbeat after a nod to a young cornwr, the lad blew the three sharp notes of attention and the noise in this bowl of rock abated as all eyes returned to the high king on his stunning black stallion.

"As brave Gŵyr and Pencampwr Gwilym ap Gerus wishes, so do we all." Ederus declared loudly, reaffirming the man's title to all, and with a firm

nod to the forlorn but newly ennobled champion who had re-joined his men. "We will send these impertinent vermin to the Underworld, so they become the slaves of our fallen warriors and your glorious prince there. Once this is done, have your men carry all the rest of their dead in here Gwilym, then our druids will seal this valley off forever at its mouth. They will close it with a ghost fence that will preserve this site in history as a great and terrible warning to all who think to invade our sacred lands of Galedon. May the Gods allow!" He ended, and the expected response was loud and immediate.

"May the Gods allow!" This huge roar of approval burst forth from his army and at these fatal words, and the Iweriu began to wail again, a mournful keening sound that was drowned out immediately, as the spearmen of the Fachomagiau had burst into joyous song once more. Again, they moved forward as one, their voices rising and falling to this age-old rhythm along with their vengeful and bloodied spears.

Beneath a breathtaking panoply of uncountable stars, two hundred voices of the Fachomagiau now soared and swooped as they sang the song of 'Camulo's Glory' around the huge balefire of cremation for Galedon's fallen warriors. The Gadwyr had collected their dead, who numbered only thirty-four men killed and just short of eighty injured. Phenomenally low numbers considering all they had done this day and balanced against the massive number of gelyn they had slaughtered in return, it was legendary. The Gadwyr took all the bodies of their fallen comrade's home, as they had always done. Back to the rocky, wind-swept lands they were born in, to be buried in hollowed out tree trunks within the sacred graveyard of DunTarwddu and in a truly ancient and secret ritual of their own. Those bodies were now bound in linen and mounted to dragging litters, these formed of stout branches and rope. These rows of linen wrapped and stick mounted corpses were laid aside to await their departure along with a large pile of blood soaked and severed enemy heads, bound by the hair into pairs. The Gadwyr would take it in turns to drag these bodies and their injured, across the wastelands and over the

frigid mountain passes of their highlands. From those frozen heights and down to their remote, ice locked lands they would trudge, with their head prizes draped around their necks along with their strings of bloody trophy knuckles. This far northern alliance would walk back home the many cold and hard miles and at the pace of their slowest walking wounded, as they were bound to each other with oaths of blood, and they never left any one of their members behind if it was humanly possible. The badly injured from this campaign would be taken south to DunAdda in the carts and cludiaid, where they would be given a chance to heal before returning to their homes in the freezing far north. The Gadwyr have never surrendered, not once in all their long and illustrious history. The concept of capitulation was burned out of them during their fearsome training, and they would fight to the death and to the last man at any opportunity as this is what they now lived to do. If the total defeat of a band on sojourn was ever to occur, their bodies would be claimed later by the remaining brotherhood if possible and returned in eternal honour to DunTarwddu. Whatever piece of land the Gadwyr stood on in battle they claimed fierce ownership of, and they would fight any number of any living things in the defence of their sacred foothold on this earth. They were sworn also in their own hot blood to do the same in the defence of their honour and their blood bound, fraternal battle comrades.

The surviving Gadwyr from this decisive battle rested now, as the remainder of Ederus' host were encamped around the king's and many other huge campfires, which all together threw enormous and dancing shadows across the snow draped granite walls of the now sealed mountain behind them. These exhausted Brythons quaffed their ale or sipped their mead and listened sleepily to the haunting singing in this melancholic period which always followed the slaughter of battle. The lords, nobles and priests were seated before their large campaign tents in a great circle around the king's fire, and their warriors slept where they lay on the adjacent ground and around each of their own crackling fires, or they talked quietly in seated groups on this broad maes. The biggest tents were those of the high king, his lords and his religious leaders, and

all were sitting in their entrances around the largest fire in their campaign easy chairs, with indentured servants and slaves passing between them to fetch and carry. The conversations naturally revolved around the events of the day, and most remembered fallen comrades whilst a trio of Khumric bards entertained the lords with their singing or the retelling of historic tales in their deeply musical voices. The three bards entertaining them tonight were well known throughout the land, and they mixed a lot of comedy and amusing stories into their performances, denigrating other lordly people to great cheer and applause. Their clever, darkly humorous comedy was precisely what was needed in these forlorn hours along with the wine, mead and the beer which flowed generously as all began to relax and to recover from this day's exertions. The disgruntled and redundant main body of Ederus' army along with the baggage had caught them up hours previously, and they were encamped now half a mile southeast and in a broad area of flatlands. At this noisy king's camp, an *adlonnwr* plied his trade between the bards' singing, colourfully dressed and performing all manner of physical contortions and athletic leaps and moves. This comical jester picked up the coin and the hack-silver of recognition adroitly from the turf as he cartwheeled over it, the tiny bronze bells at his wrists and ankles jingling merrily. All the bodies of the Iweriu and the Western Isle warriors had been carried to the place of their last stand, deep in the hollow of this adjacent mountain once all metal had been claimed. A fair number of heads had clearly been claimed too this notable day and many right hands had been chopped up for the knucklebones, but the majority of bodies were surprisingly complete. That huge pile of bodies looked almost surreal in the gloom, made more gruesome by the hundreds of bare, pale and hairy, twisted and blood smeared limbs of those mounded dead which seemed to glow eerily in this twilight. When dusk had fallen softly on this broad peninsula of land, that enormous mound of corpses had taken on the ghostly aspect of a barrow of the old people in those shadows, and these soldiers stayed well clear of it. The ghost fence had been erected by the druids across the mouth of that canyon earlier, precisely at midnight and they had secured

that barrow of lifeless flesh within it with thirty-three magic-imbued ash poles. These had been set two reeds high from the ground and then topped with the raw and wet, blood-streaked skull of a leader of these defeated invaders, each with a warning rune burned deep into the forehead. Three strings of plaited hazel bark were then entwined between these posts to complete that powerful ghost fence, marking the interior valley of this mountain as a forbidden zone for the rest of time.

An outrider approached the huge glow of this *cadlys*; Ederus' sprawling military camp, and he came from the freezing north, wrapped in wool and bent low over his saddle. These spies and lookouts of Galedon had been drifting in all evening from their distant locations, strung out along this rugged coastline and as the weather had deteriorated. This weary rider stepped down from the saddle at this flat expanse of grassland, which the enormous herd of horses had cleared of snow and were cropping now at their leisure. Tying up the army issue horse in a foul mood, he carelessly left the saddle on it before going in search of food and drink for himself as his meagre rations had been used up hours previously. Rubbing his bony backside as it ached from the hours of unfamiliar riding, he still fumed at the lookout duty he had been ordered to carry out; an onerous duty, and one normally performed by one of his numerous minions. Sniffing at the air and rubbing his numb hands together, this late arrival got a mouth-watering whiff of roasting rabbit coming from somewhere nearby and so he followed his nose, fully intending to use his position to deprive the owners of that delicious smelling meal.

"Master Eoal!" A deep voice cracked *directly* behind him, making him jump out of his skin and jerk his head around.

Nêr Olwydd Hîr stood easily and immediately behind him, towering over him, and Dorak Eoal wondered how on earth such a big man could move so silently. The screaming cat skull at this enormous man's throat seemed to laugh down at him tonight, and he hated this huge ghost-warrior with a passion, mostly because he feared his implacable, unshakeable loyalty to Ederus. Such men were dangerous in Eoal's opinion, but there was

something else about the ghost-warrior's demeanour tonight that unnerved him.

"We've been waiting for you Eoal." This huge warrior said easily, stroking one of his long and bristling moustaches with the back of an index finger, and with obvious amusement playing around those penetrating eyes.

"MASTER Eoal to you, soldier!" Eoal barked back at him. "Have a care, or I may have to speak to King Ederus about you!" Eoal warned this impossibly tall ghost-warrior, looking nervously back at his horse.

"Ah my apologies *Master* Eoal, I meant no insult, and as for good King Ederus, he eagerly awaits your presence!" Olwydd answered him easily and with an outstretched arm, that touch of amusement still playing around his hard eyes and at the corners of his mouth. This gesture lacked any hint of request, and Eoal felt a stab of fear in his chest at that moment, as there really was something about the manner of this dangerous man that troubled him tonight, but he had no real choice and just nodded his acquiescence. Olwydd Hîr waved him ahead. "After you *Master* Eoal!" He declared with that mock respect again.

Eoal eyed him carefully, and he could not help but steal another glance at his horse before strutting onwards and toward that great glowing campsite ahead. With the ghost-warrior following a little too closely for comfort, Dorak Eoal gathered his courage and stepped between two parked carts to approach the king's roaring campfire but had to step backwards quickly to dodge a tumbling jester. Backing into the warrior behind, his temper flared once more, as he was still annoyed at being dragged up to these wild and freezing highlands just to act as an accursed lookout.

"I am Galedon's master torturer and it's beneath me!" He muttered quietly to himself, bridling as Olwydd pressed him forwards again to stand in a ring of light, blinking and looking around for Ederus and his retinue.

"Dorak Eoal!" Came the booming voice of King Ederus and from across the other side of this huge fire.

Eoal craned his scrawny neck and walked around it, heading toward the king's voice and threading himself between these groups of seated warriors. He came to stand in front of a large group of seated lords and priests in a big crescent of canvas pavilions before a huge fire, and he bowed to Ederus, the princes and the druids around him, noticing the scowl on the king's face as he presented himself, and his concerns deepened.

"Master Eoal, I'm glad that you have finally joined us." Ederus added, but Eoal doubted these words as the king's eyes were hard and merciless at that moment.

Eoal looked around himself nervously as something was not quite right here. As Ederus stood and approached him he noticed that the ghost-warrior had vanished again, just as silently as he had appeared and this also gave him great cause for concern, making his nerves jangle.

"Great King Ederus, I ..."

"SILENCE!" Ederus roared at him, inches from his angular face and with his hot spittle hitting Eoal's cheeks.

He began to understand the depths of his Lord's ire at that unnerving moment and Eoal shut his mouth in fear. His brown eyes were wide now and flicking from one face to another in the aristocratic crowd around him, trying to read this suddenly fraught situation, but all he saw were the hard looks of condemnation staring back at him. The king then backed away a step before pacing the ground around him, preparing to address his nobles and the massed ranks that surrounded this royal campsite.

"Worshipful druids, princes, lords, gŵyrd and honoured spearmen of this great alliance, I would like to introduce you to one Dorak Eoal." Ederus declared loudly, his face twisting with distaste. "Known too as Eoal the *merciless* or Eoal the *cruel*!" Ederus continued to circle him as a low rumble came from this crowd, the man's sadistic reputation obviously

known to many. "He was my master spy catcher and interrogator, whom I made up and gave him all that he owned and made him all that he was." Ederus declared, pointing to him as he circled him menacingly.

Confusion and fear twisted the ageing face of Eoal now, especially at the repeated past tense, and the scrawny man began to tremble but was not sure yet why.

"We could all be at home now and in the warm bosoms of our families, but Eoal here decided not to summon me when his prisoner capitulated and informed his interrogator that he would divulge the very intelligences that could have brought us here a day or more sooner." Ederus paused for effect here, and a rumble of anger came from the packed ring of onlookers, more people drifting in to watch as there was obviously something interesting afoot.

Eoal calmed himself somewhat at Ederus' words and turned to speak to him.

"Great K..." Eoal's intended excuses were cut short by a blow to the back of his head, which stunned him and dropped him to his knees.

Ederus flexed his fingers behind Eoal, clenching his fist again and continuing his pacing before bending to the man.

"Utter one more uninvited word Eoal, and I shall have your tongue torn out of your mouth with hot pincers!" Ederus coolly told the man now on his knees and who had a pleading look of innocence on his ashen face, but he remained silent in the total belief that Ederus' threat would be carried out instantly should he speak another word.

The trembling in Eoal's legs got worse then, even if that was all Ederus knew. If *over-enthusiasm* in his sworn duties was his only charge here, it still felt as though his life was in mortal danger. Suddenly Eoal felt like a rabbit caught in a purse net as he looked around himself in confusion, but King Ederus was only just getting started.

“Eoal here, enjoying his work overmuch continued to torture the man after he had agreed to tell all!” Ederus accused him in a powerful voice, still pacing ominously around him as Eoal’s wet knees sank deeper into the cold mud. “In fact, he broke the man’s spine, almost killing him and depriving us of the hard knowledge that has brought us to this great defensive battle here today, late as it was!” His angry words carried clearly to the circle of hard and uncompromising faces which was growing steadily around this huge fire. “It took a great deal of planning, a lot of my gold and much risk in the capture of that prisoner, and Eoal’s incompetence and his selfish cruelty could have caused untold consequences! It was only the speed and ferocity of our glorious Gadwyr that prevented that vermin from crossing over to the Neweis peninsula en-masse, and if they had?” Ederus paused here for effect as the crowd around this huge campfire continued to swell and began to rumble dangerously. “We would have faced a tortuous march around Loch Linne in the teeth of a building storm to bring them to battle, and in a secure dun!” Ederus thundered. “Had Eoal here done his duty, I would not have had to send a hundred of my finest Gadwyr to hunt them down in that storm!” He growled loudly, pointing to the black heavens above the tallest mountain in all Prydein, looming monstrosly in the far north and clothed now in a slowly moving, icy mantle of swirling white. The grumbling rose in this growing crowd at these revelations especially from the remaining Gadwyr, and Eoal hung his head, hoping now for a thrashing perhaps followed by an ignominious exile. Olwydd returned suddenly and bowed briefly, before approaching the king and talking quietly in his ear. Eoal looked up from his knees, and terror gripped him now for the first time and in a great liquid convulsion of his bowels. He had spotted the calf leather pouch that he had hidden under his saddle, and it was now tucked under the ghost-warrior’s arm.

Ederus’ face paled at Olwydd’s quiet words, and his eyes blazed with a sudden fury. Grabbing the leather purse from Olwydd, he upended it so

that its contents spilled to the ground. Roughly a dozen thick and solid gold rings glittered and jingled as they fell from the purse, each *thumping* heavily as they hit the turf at Ederus' feet. A loud gasp came from the now animated audience at the sight of all this wealth, and Ederus bent to pick up one of these heavy gold rings, looking at it closely in the light of the fire.

"Iweriuan ring-gold!" He roared, looking murderously at the kneeling Eoal, who was now bent to the ground and with his head clasped in both hands in his abject terror. "We have found our traitor!" Ederus bellowed, beside himself with rage, and he drew *Fwlch-iâ* almost without thought. The crowd responded to the sight of this awesome blade and roared back, their anger at this proof of Eoal's treachery obvious and immediate, and many called for him to be slaughtered where he knelt. Ederus controlled his emotions however and held up both his hands, turning to the crowd again, *Fwlch-iâ* flashing dangerously in the firelight and silencing them all.

Ederus sheathed his great sword as the killing rage receded, and he turned to the approaching brif-druid AurArian, holding up the thick and heavy, buttery yellow ring for his inspection, plainly one of the gold rings which was commonly used by the Iweriu as currency. This tall and regal druid stepped up to Ederus and took the proffered ring in his long fingers, staring at it with an unveiled vehemence. Furious bolts of forked lightning flashed and seared the night sky below the undulating horizon of the distant hills at that moment, silently and far to the west.

"I shall take possession of this doomed creature from you good Ederus as we have a special treat for those who betray us." The strange, tremulous voice spoke, and the druid looked down bleakly at this fated traitor on the ground before making a brief signal.

Two burly stewards stepped forward and seized Eoal, who began to wail loudly in his terror at this deadly turn of events. This shameful, keening noise was soon stopped as a filthy rag was stuffed into the man's mouth,

and he was dragged away. Watching all this, Ederus looked down and made a silent apology to Druich in the Underworld, as he had doubted his veracity quite wrongly and had cursed his name. He now rescinded and withdrew these curses with a spiritual plea of regret as the traitor Dorak the *cruel* had been surely culpable, not mercenary Druich the *scot*. He realised too that Druich's claims that Eoal had come to murder him that day when he and Olwydd had intervened had in fact been true. Had Eoal managed to kill him before that all too revealing visit, he and his gŵyrd would have been almost in the dark about this invasion. Ederus kissed iron and sent another prayer to his Gods for their judgement. Alongside him, HênDdu looked around at the growing number of warriors surrounding this royal campfire for long moments, before drawing himself up to his full height to address them. His high shaved brow glistened in the firelight as did the gold mantle he wore, intricately engraved with the powerful magical runes of his impeachable authority and it drew everyone's eye.

"In a few moments, you will all witness how we druids deal with traitors in Prydein." The druid spoke in his eerie, vibrating voice and you could have heard a pin drop, as every person's focus was locked to the menacing figure of the country's prime druid at that fraught moment and who was clearly full of rage at this unforgivable act of treachery. It was a foul deed, and one which had threatened the lives of every man and woman here. Many had lost old friends in today's battle, but now at least they had someone to hold accountable for this travesty. However, every single person watching knew that Eoal was about to pay for his treason in the most terrible way, and all became quiet and even nervous, as this was the legendary HênDdu before them in all his terrible anger. Nobody knew what was about to happen next, as this dread man was capable of absolutely anything.

Einion and Drem came to remove the fabulous golden cape from HênDdu, this priceless creation only worn on these important occasions by the

primary priest of this country and for grand processions where he had no need of his arms, as it was as long as a coat and encapsulated both shoulders in its gleaming embrace. HênDdu paced the ground impatiently now that he was freed of its restriction and until a slave stepped forward to the centre of this clearing. This withdrawn and pale individual came armed with a long and narrow trenching spade, and he began to dig a deep post hole at a mark pointed out by the imperious HênDdu. The hole was soon dug, and as the slave silently withdrew, the aged, sagging and naked figure of Eoal was dragged from a pavilion by two burly men and to a chorus of loud booing. A pale and wide eyed Eoal had been bound to a rough timber 'T' cross, with his wrists tightly fastened to the cross pole and his ankles bound firmly to the upright. It appeared as though the life had literally drained out of Eoal, and the shock was apparent on his grey and gaunt face. The same two muscular stewards kicked the bottom of the post into the hole and pushed the cross upright, where it thumped into the post hole, leaning slightly to one side. A murderous howl came from the mass of onlookers then, and with many calling for Eoal to be pulled apart by horses or to be burned alive on his post, but AurArian held out a hand, adorned as it was with the pure gold and silver 'acorn ring' of his office and the silence was almost instant. A trio of bards processed then from their pavilion and with strings of juniper hung around their necks, they came to stand solemnly by this condemned man, carefully taking up their positions. Another trio emerged from another religious tent, these dressed in the shorter white gowns of the uati and with twisted crowns of mistletoe upon their shaven heads. Two of these were young women, and they flanked a pale and tall young man with enormous, blank eyes. This trio looked to be in some sort of trance, but it too took its position carefully in front of the cross, one member handing AurArian a long and sacred pair of sturdy *gefel-blingo*; the ceremonial 'iron tongs'. The druid held this black forged iron up to the sky and began to intone a long litany of prayer to the black God Lug, calling him to draw near and to witness this sacrificial offering of castigation in *His* name.

“Dread God of night. Lord of the Underworld, First Man; *Nergal*, I pray for your blessing.” The druid droned, giving Lug Ddu his primordial name and his voice vibrating even more for the prayer. “You who are the everlasting darkness, the great black God of death and rebirth who embrace and care for our dead. I beseech you to witness my sacrifice to you Arglwydd Lug Ddu.” He growled this entreaty and turned to face his victim with a terrifying grimace. “From darkness to light and from death to life; I claim you Eoal ap Ewrog ap Elwon. From life to death and from light to darkness; I condemn you Eoal ap Ewrog ap Elwon!” He snarled this terrifying curse at Eoal on his cross, giving him full and official title, and the old man’s eyes were filled with his horror in response above the filthy gag. HênDdu turned away from him with a scowl and raised his arms once more. “Witness our sacrifice oh great God Lug I beseech you and know that our love and our duty to you great Nergal is as bright today as it has ever been!” He declared this earnestly in his loud and vibrating voice of power. He did the same downwards, repeating these same ancient words towards the Underworld, and satisfied that his pleas had been heard, HênDdu turned back to Eoal and snatched the filthy rag from his mouth as he circled him.

Gripping the long black and heavy iron tongs, HênDdu approached Eoal once more and with a purposeful step. With eyes of stone, the druid took a grip on the tender skin over Eoal’s left collar bone with the long-handled tongs and he began to pull hard, twisting and yanking at it. The inch wide meeting plates of these tongs had been filed horizontally and with rough grooves giving them the purchase required, especially as the work became so slick with blood and so quickly. Eoal’s body jacked into a rigid rictus against his post, and he made a catlike mewing sound at the first cold and shocking grip of these sacrificial metal pincers. His back arched and his limbs strained against their bindings from the pain, as his elderly skin had been pinched hard between the cold iron and stretched to a pleated peak. It finally tore open with a splash of red, and Eoal screamed

hysterically in unbearable agony and which was the cue for the bard trio, who instantly burst into the extemporised *cysoni'r artaith*; the harrowing, spontaneous and *wordless* song of 'tortuous harmony'. These sonorous druids sang booming notes in the three sacred voices, and in close harmony or contrast with the blood curdling screaming of Eoal. It was an incredibly difficult thing to get right and took many years of training and practice to master. Jointly correct anticipation and collective harmony being the keys to success, and when done correctly, it struck terror into all who heard this dread and haunting sound. To this nerve-shredding lament and to another stark splash of red, HênDdu then ripped this strip of flesh from the man's chest. It was about an inch wide, and as the druid yanked at it, it tore Eoal's left nipple in two. This bloody strip of flesh tapered as he ripped at it, and it came away over Eoal's ribs with a tug, and the man began to vibrate on his post with the insupportable agony. His screaming changed in tenor then as did the wordless harmonising of the bards alongside him, and as the blood flowed down his quivering ribs, a huge roar of approval burst from the crowd. AurArian Aruchel then continued methodically to flay the man alive, savagely tearing long strips of wrinkled skin from his body with these sacrificial tongs, causing blood to run down his twitching and writhing body and his wriggling legs, to drip to the flesh littered and bloodied turf below. Within minutes the druid's white robe had looked like a butcher's apron, and drips of Eoal's thin blood flew from his tongs as he tugged and worried at the leathery flesh of his victim. Throughout this harrowing and gore drenched procedure, the druid's eyes had blazed with a cold and pitiless fury. The abject, unholy screaming of Eoal, and the dreadful, harmonised singing of the bards continued eerily, the crowd becoming wide eyed and awestruck as they watched the fury of the most powerful druid in all Prydein mete out the most horrific punishment.

Drawing on their years of obsessive training and in one of the most ancient of the druidic powers, thought to have come from Mesopotamia

long ago and brought here by these northerners' Hittite ancestors, these uati; this trio of ovates standing alongside their thrashing victim on his cross watched every twitch and heard every sound. Over the haunting meld of screaming and the dark, wordless singing of the bards, they took inspiration from the wet, ripping sound of elderly skin and the straining, creaking noises of the rawhide restraints. These sounds they tuned into were overpowered occasionally by the cracking and agonised popping of Eoal's joints, which were intermittently mingled with the loud grinding and splintering of his teeth. The uati's spirit tuned ears and their huge, vacant eyes missed nothing. Together, they interpreted these signs and sounds into spirit knowledge and channelled it to their Gods, so they would in turn grant them the ability to divine a future from this traitor's death. The dread, *fell* sound of this fluctuating singing and screaming drifted across the littered and blood drenched battlefield and its growing flock of flapping, raucous buzzards. Onwards it floated, to wash over the enormous barrow of dead bodies in the forbidden valley, and it seemed finally that the pitiless Gods of Prydein were once again sated and content.

Eoal had soon confessed everything, and as he did so, the mass of onlookers began the low and malevolent chant; 'Addew! Addew! Addew!' The *addew*; the vital 'confession' was gained, thus justifying all, and the chanting got louder. This huge crowd of vengeful warriors stamped their feet in rhythm; 'Addew! Addew! Addew!' and to this primal, malevolent tempo, Eoal was forced to dry swallow every gold ring of betrayal, each one accompanied by a great cheer from the crowd. This torture continued for three more agonising hours, ironically long after Eoal had surrendered and told all. His raw and red dripping body hung limply from its cross, now looking like a grotesque and bloody carcass suspended in a butchery. It hung heavily, exposing the bluish-red of its bared and white marbled muscles, each flensed limb stretched tight against the sticky and blood-soaked restraints. The white and ragged fringes of Eoal's remaining

hands, feet and neck looked incongruous as if he were wearing white gloves, boots and a grotesque, pale and twisted mask, all of which contrasted starkly with the red, ruined remains of his flayed extremities and his exposed torso. Whilst the druids and the bards regained their breath, the thing that was once a man was free of pain and was slumped senseless, looking like a scorched and demolished victim of some form of violent crucifixion. Eoal was mercilessly brought back to awareness however and quickly, by a bucket of cold salted water and a pot of foul-smelling ointment held under his nose. At a nod from HênDdu, this was done each time he succumbed to the unbearable agony and fainted. This harsh treatment and the liberal use of that rank, ammoniac pot resumed the horrific twitching of the suspended carcass pinned to its cross of woe, and it restarted the cracked and broken screams, but they were merely faded gasps of a hellish delirium now. These unflinching druids snatched him back unwillingly each time regardless, back from the numb cocoon of blackness and the very horizon of oblivion. Back to HênDdu they dragged him, back to the stark, blinding and unbearable agony of his last moments on this earth.



Chapter Five.

The snow had been falling heavily and steadily for hours as had the temperature, and Nêr Brith Fawr crawled through this fresh snow toward Darn, his captain. This broad and bearded officer was huddled under a mature cypress tree growing next to a huge boulder on the nearest side of this desolate vale, both for concealment and shelter from this howling wind. This icy blast drove huge volumes of frozen snow through this gorge and it was interspersed with flying icy shards, making it almost blinding out in the open. It was funnelled by the natural form of this land between these mountains they had found themselves between, and the wind tore through this valley with a strength that could knock a careless man off his feet. It was a scouring highland snowstorm which had hardened as the temperature fell, and it blasted into bare skin now like a thousand burning lashes. Each man was grateful for the double knitted and hooded woollen mantle he had brought with him, and the Gadwyr took cover at this woodland edge under their wool now, keeping their pale and blue swirled skin covered as best they could. They had to shake the snow off themselves every now and again like dogs and reset their footing lest they became buried.

Brith crawled into the dry and needle strewn ground under the canopy of this mature fir to reach his man and rose carefully onto one knee to join him. The huge granite boulder took most of the brunt, and they huddled behind it and this broad cypress with its large and riven plates of rough bark, each of which was topped by a tiny mound of fresh snow. His man indicated across the narrow valley ahead of them with a nod and to the rough ground at the far side of this storm swept gulley, which they could both just about see led up to the rock littered base of a tall cliff about fifty reeds away. Brith's pale eyes moved through the side-sweeping snow and across the gap before them, up the rough and boulder strewn slope to the

far side of this steep valley and to the mouth of a large cave. There were many faint footprints leading up to the black and gaping maw of that cave, but in another half an hour Brith knew they would have disappeared altogether. They had crossed the spoor of these escaping enemy some hours ago and had followed their wide track easily for about an hour before the snow came, and it had come straight from the flanks Arglwydd Neweis herself in dense and withering clouds of white. Within minutes, that wide swathe of muddy footprints which had been child's play to follow initially began to vanish under the slowly descending and steadily increasing downpour of frozen snow. It had then become a race against time itself and so they had started to run. These tenacious, chosen warriors of the Gadwyr had struggled for the last two hours in this climaxing storm, each warrior tied to a long hoop of rope, and with twelve warriors attached to each rope loop, they had ploughed onwards into this whiteout in pairs and bound to their formations. Forced to walk when heading *into* the howling blast of this dreadful storm, they soldiered on, but in this unique way they could continue to move forwards in the worst of conditions without losing anyone. They physically forced their way through this raging blizzard step by step, bent forwards and with their grimacing war faces blazing through their red beards. Stumping onwards without pause into this storm's faceless fury, the Gadwyr were hell bent on finding these fugitives, and as long as they knew the ground under their fur clad feet, they would continue battling onwards or they would die in the attempt. This implacable refusal to bend or to give in any way propelled them ever onwards, and led by an immense man of granite will, they would not and could not quit. These caterpillar like, dual formations of hemp joined warriors had been strung out in a line as their best trackers at the front had kept them on the quickly dwindling spoor. As this fading trail entered the tortured pathways and goat tracks of the western highlands, their options began to dwindle as the storm grew dangerously. So, Ogof Alun; this cave opposite had been chosen fortuitously as a rallying and a resting point. There had been times when they could only see about ten feet ahead of them into this thick blanket that fell without

pause, but now it seems their unique stubbornness has paid a dividend and they finally have their quarry trapped. Those fleeing men had obviously come to the same conclusion as this storm worsened and had too made for this well-known cave.

“How well do you know this place?” Brith asked his subordinate quietly, holding a hand over his mouth to cover the billowing cloud of moisture that issued from it, and Darn nodded, doing the same.

“Ay Nêr Brith, I know it well. It is one of very few such large enough caves hereabouts, and it was a good guess. Ogof Alun is one of the largest in these hills and one which has the ancient drawings of our ancestors on its walls.” Darn answered him quietly, his eyes not moving from the dark mouth of that cave across the gully, and only just visible now behind the sheeting snow. “It is large and deep and there is no other exit.” He said thoughtfully. “And they won’t be expecting us in this!” He added, giving Brith an atavistic, eager look below his raised and ice crusted eyebrows.

“What lies within Darn?”

“Nothing much sir, just a bare floor which rises and a large, empty chamber which lies beyond. Big enough for two or three hundred to shelter in at a guess and with a few ancient fire rings of stones scattered about. It should be a simple matter.”

“Mmm, nothing of our work is ever simple Darn, but let us hope they are all asleep like their guard was.” Brith grinned, looking over at the slowly freezing body of the enemy guard Darn had just silently killed. The wide pool of blood around the man’s torn throat was stark against the white and was already twinkling as it crystallised on the freezing snow. “We may be able to offer our ancestors some entertainment this night Darn. Very well, we shall see.” Brith declared quietly. He turned to give a number of signals to his warriors crouching in the falling snow.

Joining his men, they quickly and silently split into two large groups without a word spoken, moving stealthily across the maelstrom of this desolate gulley in low crouches. Slowly, the Gadwyr climbed the opposite

slope and approached each side of the cave mouth, the wild wind covering all sounds. When all were in position, Brith drew the two great battle axes from his belts, both of which still bore the marks and smears of blood from the earlier battle, and these elite, chosen Gadwyr around him did the same, the eager lights of excitement dancing now in their wild and pale eyes. Brith nodded with satisfaction as he looked at these intensely eager warriors around him, proud of the very best of his men that he had led here. His huge chest swelled as he drew an enormous breath into his lungs, and a terrible battlecry erupted from his lips.

“Gadwyr GrutArd!” Brith Fawr bellowed, leaping forwards into the darkness with his huge axes swinging, and his Gadwyr roared and leapt with him. These monstrous highland warriors followed their legendary chieftain into the black mouth of this cave at a run, and many dozens of shining, double-edged axes swung into action with a terrible and flashing certainty.

The exhausted Western Islanders did not stand much of a chance against these uninvited monsters, and many were decapitated or eviscerated in their sleep by these snarling mankillers. Some of the lighter sleepers and the more experienced among these exhausted invaders managed to jump up and take arms against the Gadwyr, but these were overcome quickly, mostly by the speed and surprise of this attack but also by the skill and great practice of these professional warriors. Although outnumbered by almost three to one, the Gadwyr spread into this cave like an unstoppable wave of sudden death, and their axes stole the lives of many fatigued raiders before they were awake or even knew what was happening. There was not a shred of mercy in any of these huge but astonishingly agile Galedonians, and hundreds of these bold *gelyn* died in the first few minutes of furious action, the slaughter being fast, clinical and immense.

With the echoing screams of the dying ringing in his ears and bouncing off the walls of this cave, Brith leapt over the central fire to face the legendary King Brude Bredus, who stood at the back and with six equally huge and brutish men around him. Bredus was armed with a great sword

and shield, and his personal guard locked shields about three paces in front of their king, but the Gadwyr paused for nothing and no man. Brith and his enraged warriors fell on these westerners with a fury approaching madness, and the king's guard were beaten down and slaughtered in minutes. Only Brude Bredus remained, and Brith controlled his infuriated men, holding them back.

"This one is mine!" He growled at them before moving in for the kill.

Cornered and trapped he may have been, but Bredus had not clawed his way to the top of an army of killers through luck, and he roared his defiance back at Brith.

"Come on then you backward sister shagger!" Bredus yelled at him in his guttural western accent, spittle flying from his great shaggy beard, and then he came at him in a rush like an enraged bull.

Bredus and Brith charged each other over the sandy floor of this cave, and they connected with an enormous crash from the immense collision.

These two giants slammed into each other, shield to flat axe and armlet, and the concussion reverberated around this cave like thunder. These two huge, bearded men screamed at each other as they shoved and twisted, each trying to gain advantage so that a blow could be delivered. In this initial struggle, Brith's foot turned on a loose rock and he lost his balance for a moment, but it was enough for Bredus to seize the initiative, shoving Brith the way he had slipped so that he was forced to tumble and roll on the floor. The Gadwyr crowding the cave moved back quickly, making a great space for these two huge warriors, and Bredus charged Brith instantly, swinging his great sword, but as large as Brith was, he was as quick as a fox and rolled away from the stroke. Regaining his footing, Brith just managed to pull back his head to evade another stroke, one that saw the sharp tip of Bredus' sword whistle an inch short of his throat. He took the next and obvious backhand stroke on the head of his left axe and then disengaged, moving steadily backwards and down into the red belly of this body littered cave, backdropped in sharp contrast by the thickly falling curtain of white outside. The Gadwyr made way for these duelling

champions, kicking and rolling away the bodies of the fallen gelyn from the vast pool of blood which had collected in a dip in the centre of this cave floor. Brith seemed to falter again as he backed towards the entrance, stepping clumsily over a dead western warrior whilst splashing ankle deep in warm, steaming and stinking blood. This was the moment that Bredus had waited for, and he rushed forwards, screaming and raising his sword for a huge and overhead killing stroke, but Brith was no fool and had been working toward this moment himself. Bredus' long sword flashed forwards but made a harsh '*clang*' sound as it struck the roof of this cave, which was lower as it neared the mouth, and the blade caught. A bleak smile broke across Brith's lips as Bredus' eyes flicked upwards, and at that same moment, Brith threw his right-hand axe and he threw it hard, hitting the man squarely on the chin with the lead weighted head. This great invading king crashed senseless to the floor, his long sword flying from numb fingers, and Brith's terrifying smile was complete. The cheers in *Ogof Alun* were almost deafening, as the Gadwyr had kept their promise once again and *buddug*; the all-important 'victory' was theirs once more. Brith stooped to pick up his thrown axe from the floor and swung it again over his head, this time cleanly killing and decapitating the fallen king. It caused a great spurt of arterial blood from the neck of Bredus to splash up the wall of this cave, as if somebody had just thrown a bucket of the steaming gore up it. The cheering got louder as Bredus' hot blood sprayed on the ground into a steaming puddle, and which then trickled through the dirt of this floor to join the lake of spilled and stinking blood already in the belly of this cave. Picking up the head of Bredus by the hair with its twisted features, its filthy beard and its ragged, dripping stump of a neck, Brith held it up to the firelight roaring his own victory cry and with his own eyes glittering. Bredus' dead eyes remained fixed and glazed in comparison, looking upwards and inwards; forever crossed in death. Brith was joined by his gore splattered men, splashing in the warm blood underfoot and shaking their own bloody trophies amid wild cheering, which grew, and grew until the cave of Alun was booming with the voices of these triumphant Gadwyr. 'Buddug-GrutArd! Buddug-

GrutArd! Buddug-GrutArd!’ They roared as one, their glory bouncing off these colourful walls. A gust of wind fanned the fires, making their sticklike ancestors and the animals they once hunted dance on these blood splashed walls and on the painted roof of their old home in joint celebration.

* * * * *

Ederus washed down a roasted partridge leg with a log of fine Galedonian ale and from the comfort of his personal campaign chair. He had Erran tie the entry flap of this great canvas tent back earlier so that he could keep an eye on the northern approach road. Despite the odd flurry of snow which had the temerity to blow through the open flap, and the voluminous amount of heat from the brazier that was sucked through it into the freezing void beyond, Ederus felt compelled to have it thus so he could keep watch for his northern warriors. The once star spangled and black dome of sky above him was now besmirched by another quickly approaching snowstorm, and Ederus sighed. It was a storm which had brought an early night to this part of Galedon, but this second blizzard approaching reduced his lateral view now to only thirty reeds, but he could not stop himself looking every now and then. The wind had changed direction this hour and which thwarted the final throes of the primary, northern storm, and this equally dark and threatening opponent had advanced powerfully from the southeast. Like two great bulls locking horns, those colossal black thunderheads were infinitely slowly tearing each other apart in the heavens above and around Pen Neweis as they battled it out for supremacy. “Life itself is a battle!” Ederus mumbled to himself, and he became thoughtful, nodding as he watched those huge and black formations in the northern heavens swirl into an extremely slow but fatal dance of death, twisting and tearing at each other as they circled the tallest and most revered peak in all Prydein.

Ederus knew it was probably too early to expect the return of the Gadwyr if they ever did return. This unthinkable consequence was pushed to the back of his mind again as it pricked his conscience, but his gaze was

continually drawn northwards, and he refused to retire as he knew sleep would not come this night. Most of his *cadlys* had settled down for this freezing night more than an hour ago, and preparations for tomorrow's triumphal journey south to DunAdda were almost complete. They could only travel if the south-eastern gale vanquished its northern opponent, and for the victorious storm to then break inland, and so the apprehension had been apparent on all his subject's faces throughout the evening. Ederus' thoughts mirrored those of his people, and he did not relish a snow locked military camp out here in these rocky tracts, as he knew many people had frozen to death last year in their own homes. It would be far worse out in this open ground, threatened by the pitiless northern highlands overlooking them and the freezing winds blowing in from the open sea which hemmed them.

"More curmi-da my lord?" Erran offered, stifling a yawn, breaking his train of thought and holding out a large jug of the frothing beer.

"Yes, why not Erran!" Ederus accepted affably, holding out his favourite silver strapped log.

Erran was refilling the cup when Ederus surprisingly dropped it to the floor with a *thunk*, and a big splash of beer shot up toward Erran, who was shocked and owl eyed, and he looked fearfully up to his king. Ederus stood without thought, transfixed and with a look of pure disbelief on his bearded face. A huge smile broke out across Ederus' face at that enlightening moment, and his heart tripped as he saw the unmistakable figure of Nêr Brith Fawr emerge like a monstrous underworld phantom from the falling curtain of snow, leading his astonishing Gadwyr back into this camp at a trot. All were covered in snow, and it was clear they had triumphed as each man carried a pair of hard frozen, bloody trophies.

"Erran, fetch the cornwr and tell him to blow assembly! Quickly lad!" Ederus blurted out, his heartbeat soaring along with his soul, and Erran, his fatigue forgotten raced off.

Ederus watched these matchless warriors head directly for the biggest campfire, and his heart swelled as the cornwr sounded the four repeating, ascending notes of assembly. Nêr Brith broke from his men and headed directly for Ederus, carrying his prize, and this huge, blue tattooed man fell to his knees in front of Ederus' tent, dusted with frozen snow and breathing deeply but steadily.

"My liege lord, I bring you what you requested, the head of the western invader Brude Bredus!" He grunted, his broad chest swelling and his blue swirled body beginning to steam like a prize bull. As he held out the grisly trophy, Ederus could see that Bredus' greying and bearded face bore a terrified, haunted expression which had frozen into place at his violent demise. The eyes were now opaque crystalline slits, and strangely they were looking up, cross eyed. The twisted mouth was open showing brown and ragged teeth, and the frozen tongue had slipped back to where only the crystalised pink tip showed at the back of the throat. Ederus took the prize, grabbing the severed head by its stiff and ice crusted, dirty hair, and he held it up to his own eye level.

"I will drink wine from your wet skull tonight as promised, my rash and uncouth king of the Western Isles!" He growled, his eyes shining with appreciation. "The cost Brith?" Ederus asked him quietly, dreading the butcher's bill for his unconsidered promise.

"No losses lord king, some small wounds but no serious injuries, so no real cost great Ederus!" Brith rumbled from his huge chest expressionless.

The horn blew again then, clear and stark into this cold night air, and people awoke, gathering around the huge *lord's* fire. The gŵyrd and the priests too came from their shelters to witness the culmination of an oath-sworn piece of historic legend. Warriors rolled out from under their *adlen* to join this growing swell of excited people. These simple rectangles of waxed canvas which sheltered every soldier in the field were tied to trees or bushes, and every man present who rolled out from under his, knew that this day would be sung about for ever and to the end of days. They knew that they would have the unique honour and pride to bear witness

as these monstrous hounds of war gathered around the fire, grinning broadly, soaking up their bri and holding up their hard frozen and bloody trophies for all to see.

“Stand Nêr Brith. I and all my combrogi salute and honour you and your Gods blessed warriors.” Ederus growled, the emotion constricting his throat. As Brith stood, Ederus threw his arm about him and led him to the fire, where the king gripped the man’s massive shoulders. “I make you *Gŵyr* Brith Fawr, Lord of Tref Teirw, DunTarwddu and Galedon!” Ederus declared, conferring the title loudly so that all could hear, before leading him to where the food had been saved for them. These fiery haired warriors fell on the meat like a pack of starving wolves, and the encircling crowd which had grown with each moment raised and pumped their right fists, roaring a chant of honour over and over again; ‘Gadwyr! Gadwyr! Gadwyr!’ As a huge ring of celebrating allied warriors crowded around this great gathering around the fire and the ice began to fall from the Gadwyr’s fiery hair, Ederus noted a peculiarity among all these chosen and victorious giants, as to a man they seemed to be wearing dark red boots. With a jolt, he realised that they were all wearing boots of blood. These men had obviously fought ankle deep in their enemy’s gore this night, and Ederus’ eyes, his understanding, his admiration and his pride all grew at once from the knowledge.

The northern tempest eventually vanquished its weaker opponent, and this victorious storm unfortunately hit the encampment in the frigid early hours like the hammer of Taranu. The Galedon alliance was forced to break camp in the dark and head south, blown along by a howling wind that scoured exposed skin in moments. If they did not move they would be inundated, and Ederus’ great host steeled itself for the long, cold and dark journey to DunAdda and the distant coast. Countless millions of jagged, icy shards were blasted south by this howling gale, around, over and between these long ranks of trudging horses and warriors, turning an already difficult journey into the deadly nightmare of a full-blown highland snowstorm. All were covered in mantles and extra blankets and bent

forwards from the waist as they rode or stepped through this fresh and building snow, visibility reduced to just a few paces. It would have been difficult for a southerner to believe that Imbolc was just days away, as here in the north it felt like Yule still. The Gadwyr had marched north in hemp-bound groups hours ago, looking like stringed loops of fiery haired ghosts as they vanished into the dark and roaring maw of this howling storm, many dragging litters with a body, or an injured warrior strapped to them. All had either a pair of bouncing, frozen heads hung around their necks or a bloody string of severed right hands, but each huge man had a gold coin in his pocket and victory in his big heart. They had been chanted out of camp by every man and woman of Ederus' host and honoured loudly, as they had the previous evening around the campfires.

In any great relocation, the druids always fared better than most in their covered carts, whilst their suffering drivers continually cursed the state of the roads, many of them begging the age-old question; 'When was somebody going to sort these diabolical bloody roads out?' These garrulous and elevated drivers were protected by deeply hooded, fur lined leather capes and thick gauntlets, but it was the melancholic Fachomagian spearmen of the rearguard who suffered the most. These doughty northern warriors bore the teeth of this climaxing storm which pursued them, so their ranks were rotated regularly, and the captains were ever watchful for those struggling the most and for those who began to fall behind from carelessness or exhaustion. The *cantorion* among these freezing ranks at the rear bravely struck up the first bars of a national favourite; 'The handfasting of Erb' and the singing spread swiftly. Although muted by this relentless snowfall, it flowed forwards like a blessed wave of inspiration, and in moments every voice in this host was raised in glorious, valiant song. *'Their hands were tied-fast as their nations' fame, with their souls and their hearts entwined with their names. Bound up by a spell of an old druid's shame, they were burned together in his sacred flame!'* These ancient words insinuated themselves through the snow laden boughs of these trees above these people's bowed heads and before then soaring to the heavens. The singing warmed them all, binding

them closer as they battled this malevolent storm, which all knew had been wrought by the Iweriuan arch-druids in spiteful revenge for their utterly failed raid and the catastrophic loss of all they had ventured. The going became easier and the relief immense once they entered the vast forest of Galedon, as the protective spirit of this greatest of forests could not be challenged. The uncountable trees soaked up the worst of this gale force wind that whipped up behind them and bore the assault of many of the freezing needles carried within it. The atmosphere lifted as did every heart as the black spirits that stalked them were at last turned aside. The easy pace was well suited to these truly ancient narrow pathways that led south through the countless trees of this vast Galedonian forest, and even the slight increase in temperature was a blessed relief to all. Spirits rose along with valiant voices; determination was bolstered, and legs were stiffened for this onerous march to the coast.

Two hours later the singing had petered out, and now, immeasurably long moments trudged into a hard and crystalline silence, punctuated only by thousands of frozen and unfeeling feet crunching into crusting snow. Even the cursing had stopped, and an exhausted, pain filled silence enveloped them all now, making the minutes stretch agonisingly into hours. As these noble warriors and civilians ploughed onward through this blizzard, all real grasp of time and distance was lost to all but the strongest of them. Separation was death and every soul in this great caravan knew it, each person struggling with their own personal demons. Each fought with all their emotional might to push away that quiet little voice that spoke of surrender; that agreeable, logical voice at the back of each mind that proposed submission would win the day. That sympathetic yet persistent sigh, with its silky and sweetened invitation to lie down in this soft and comfortable snow, with the unquestionable promise that all this pain and suffering would simply melt away flitted through all these people in cynical whispers. That way promised certain death, and these negative thoughts needed to be held down, subdued by raw willpower and combated by the warrior's credo. Anger kept many a man and woman warm, inside if not out. A fierce determination was needed to endure, to

keep going and to never surrender, and every fibre of these Brythons' beings were focused on the simple action of lifting one numb foot after the other. Eventually and to all these enduring warriors, the whole world seemed subdued and reduced to just this one long and tortuous, wind-blown road. Life itself became distilled into this simple formula for these suffering and slowly freezing combrogi; one step followed by another, and all were bent completely to this fundamental, life-saving imperative. They all knew too that it could be worse, as they could be battling *into* this storm. Despite the dense overhead canopy the snowfall was still heavy although irregular, and the ordeal of dragging one dead yet glowing foot past the other seemed endless. It began to feel like some infinite and deeply mythical trial to these suffering comrades as this long morning passed into a painfilled afternoon, until riders appeared suddenly through the descending white blanket ahead like a blessing from their Gods. Horsemen materialised through this dense snowfall and the trees ahead of them, and they came from the almost indistinguishable southern lane. They were heading directly toward the lords and the gŵyrd of Ederus' vanguard, and twelve fabulous Epidian horses and their winged warriors drew near, lifting everyone's spirits, and a great cheer went up. These knights were living proof that DunAdda could not be much further, and these welcome riders caused their horses to rear as-one, before each then pirouetted on their hind legs in salutation and recognition. It was a fantastic show of horsemanship, and each warrior held his long cavalry sword aloft, whooping in delight as their sky-blue cloaks swirled around them in the falling snow.

Within the hour, Ederus' army had emerged from this vast forest, in sight finally of the coast and the longed-for twin island caer of DunAdda and its attendant riverside town, escorted proudly by these newly acquired honour guard of flamboyant cavalrymen. A long line of ancient and yellowed, post mounted skulls bordered each side of this widening drover's lane, and which ran from the edge of this immense forest down to the sloping ground around the apron of a broad and impressive, fortified timber *sarn*. This heavy-duty timber causeway led out over the

water from the town below and over to the first island dun, situated about sixty reeds from the shore. There was an equally long and robust looking timber bridge structure stretching out from DunAdda's rear, this heading upriver over a hundred *reeds* to the second, smaller island of Ynys Epona and it made a memorable sight. The snowfall was heavy now they were out in the open again, but as Ederus' army approached DunAdda a huge crowd of people could be seen outside the causeway to that high walled island fortress, and this growing crowd cheered as Ederus and his host broke the treeline. To a low and distant rumbling, the main gates of that huge and impressive caer swung out, and hundreds of mounted Epidian cavalry streamed out of its frontal palisade in tight formation. Five abreast they came thundering down that long ramp, and rank after rank of these wing-helmed warriors poured through the outer gates of their fortress and clattered across the timber causeway. They charged onto the paved apron around the landward end of that long causeway, their uncountable horseshoes sounding like a thousand hammers, many striking showers of vivid sparks from the flagstones as they gained land. Breaking smartly into a huge crescent formation before the crowd of civilians gathered before Tref Adda, they all drew their long and leaf shaped swords. A row of solemn druids and bards filed out behind the cavalry, making their own crescent of white and pale green robes before those spectacular horsemen and all the townsfolk behind them. All then spread their arms and began an indiscernible litany to their assembled deities as these exhausted Galedonians plodded downhill toward them. The two standards of the Epidian princes were then carried aloft, out of those huge gates and across that *sarn* in plain sight, one a crowned white stallion on a black background and the other a black mare on a white background. As this pair of banner-bearers stepped onto land, one enormous flag was unfurled in their centre and raised high by a third, this bearing the rearing golden stag cygil of Galedon on its blood red background. As the colours joined their host, the Epidians' right arms went aloft with their glittering swords held equally high in salute, and their sonorous voices reached Ederus now as they chanted 'Galedon! Galedon! Galedon!'

His banner, which had been mounted on a wooden 'T' frame was twice the size of their own, and Ederus wiped his eyes with a linen kerchief at the surprise and the honour. He sat straighter in his saddle to receive this glorious, deeply moving tribute, and his spirit and soul both soared with the *bri* that came with it; that elusive bounty which cannot be bought but can only be *bestowed* to a member of the warrior class by his or her peers. Bri is a treasure beyond all material wealth, and it is bound irretrievably to valorous deeds and military success. Bri is the distillation of one's honour, the forging of a warrior's reputation and the consolidation of his or her renown. Bri is the iron spine of their characters, and it is the very essence of the respect that they demand, being the honed edge of personal distinction for all Brythons. All warriors bathed in its warm and eternal, golden glow once gained, and Ederus did just that this cold but victorious evening.

Huge bronze war horns began to sound in a cacophony of celebration and great elk-skin drums began to bang loudly, the cheering of the crowd becoming wild as Ederus and his gŵyrd arrived before them. This crowd of plain folk who had braved this storm and had travelled miles from their villages and brochs to honour and welcome this legendary host of Galedon began to flow towards them. The town facing that fortress peninsula was bedecked for Imbolc, and these joyous werrin were bedecked too in hawthorn and celandine blossoms for this historic event. These they threw by the handful to the snowy ground and over these long and weary lines of troops, as all knew the measure of doom these brave men and women had averted, and it showed on their flushed faces and in their grateful eyes. The gŵyrd in the van were surrounded by a cheering and clapping mass of people as the drums pounded a frenetic beat and the war horns blew, and every face in this excited crowd glowed with the cold but beamed in thankful praise and salutation. The twelve smiling horsemen of their escort continued toward the Linn, bypassing these people and leading Ederus and his army through *stryd fawr* of this little town. The werrin of Tref Adda parted, making an avenue of honour, and so this bedraggled and exhausted host was led down to the great Linn Latharn

and onto the paved apron, where their escort mounted the huge timber causeway. The Galedon host followed wearily, and their formations narrowed as they stepped onto this long timber sarn, the exhaustion telling now they were safe. They trudged over the cold waters of the Linn, making a thunderous sound on the boards as they passed over it. Stepping off this timber causeway and onto the paved inner avenue, they plodded up the chariot ramp and to the huge pair of black iron and timber gates which had been thrown open in welcome. Passing between the enormous gate posts of this infamous and spectacular dun and once through the killing gallery of its main entrance, this exhausted army came into the broad central maes of this fortress with great relief. There they saw where the workshops, stores and covered galleries had been emptied as needs required, and these outbuildings were now filled with tables, absolutely groaning under the weight of a fabulous and lavish feast laid out for them all. Long scouts had brought news of their imminent arrival two hours previously, and the whole fortress had swung into action. Lit braziers were everywhere, and a huge roasting pit had been uncovered in the centre of this vast parade ground where it emanated glorious, wonderful warmth and painfully mouth-watering aromas of roasting meat. Consequently, it was much warmer inside this fortress and the relief was almost painful to all, as freezing fingers ached with the sudden heat and their flushed faces began to glow. Young *arwein* ran to carry out their squiring duties, taking the reins of each lord and lady's horse as these cold and weary warriors dismounted gratefully. The rest of this marching army now entered the palisaded fortress, spreading out into this broad internal assembly ground and heading in groups for the crackling and glowing braziers, ravenous for their warmth. The nobles' horses were led through the gates at the back of this dun by the many *arwein* and across the next long causeway to the second island dun; Epona, one hundred reeds further upriver and cleaving its own enduring existence through the cold rushing waters of Arglwydd Linn Latharn. This was Epidia, and so all these horses would be treated to the very finest care and attention imaginable on that smaller but adjoining island, beginning with a hot

spring water bath and a long and healing, soapy massage before being dried and inspected. Then these revered horses would be watered and fed the very finest food before being stabled in the most sumptuous, warm and dry accommodation. Each block in this huge building was constantly attended by an adoring stablemaster and many earnest subordinates whilst their noble guests were entertained by gentle singers in eternal and blissful worship.

On the primary island and within the great walls of the fortress at its heart, great piles of bread loaves and plates of cooked meat were crammed onto the many stout tables arrayed around the parade ground of DunAdda, all of which were laid out in rows and covered by a veritable river of snow covered, waxed canvas canopy. Great bowls of pickles, steaming roots and vegetables burdened one group of long tables, accompanied by many varied pastes, and sauces, all laid out in pots with wooden spreaders, from hot radish and mustard to wild garlic cream. Alongside these were wide wicker baskets, placed here and there and filled with a variety of cheeses, fresh fruits and berries. Red faced cooks were bringing more platters of whole roasted fowl and great fat, pink haunches of honey glazed ham from the kitchens to these already laden tables, having to push their way through this hungry crowd. Perspiring stewards carved hot, steaming hanks of aromatic white meat from dozens of honey glazed suckling pigs, all roasting and crackling as they rotated on their dog-irons in the blazing firepit. Hot *medd-melys* filled dozens of steaming cauldrons, each with its own ladle, and hundreds of cow horn cups had been stacked alongside for this popular honey-mead. Strong and freshly brewed three-grain beer was also set out in tall, unglazed clay pots with long handles and each covered with a large, waxed linen cloth tied around the lip with hemp twine. An enormous pile of drinking logs was placed alongside these gallons of beer, sharing their tables with bowls of roasted and salted nuts. Coloured bunting had been strung around the walls, and dozens of slaves with shovels had cleared the snow from the open central arena so that musicians could play and jester's tumble. This entertainment added to the sudden festive atmosphere in DunAdda, and

all it seemed had been made ready for their arrival. Prince Wrad; Crown Prince Galan's brother and the ruler of DunOlwen, a big and hirsute man who bore the black mare cygil on white, strode across his brother's central courtyard then to greet them with his surly Pencampwr Gŵyr Elgan ap Bram at his heel. This swarthy, black haired and bearded prince called loudly for order so that he could address his new arrivals with great enthusiasm and in his brother's own caer. Jesters stood and the horns squawked rudely to silence. The manic drumming stopped, and a hushed silence settled on this massed multitude along with the thick and persistent white flakes.

"Great King Ederus ap Ewin, the valorous gŵyrd of Galedon, of course my esteemed and beloved brother and every courageous person here, I honour and salute you all!" Wrad called out, arms thrown wide in welcome and then bowing deeply. "Please be at home and at your ease here, and I beg you don't stand on ceremony as I'm sure you are all hungry and thirsty!" The prince declared; the whiteness of his teeth accentuated by the dense black beard.

Ederus and his gŵyrd bowed deeply in return to their host as Galan went to embrace his younger brother, but there was something about Galan's brother and his taciturn champion this evening which rang a discordant note with Ederus. Aware of Wrad's long pending suit for the hand of his daughter, he expected a mention of it and perhaps a more personal greeting, but this normally boastful prince did not even look at him much less press his position, and it was at odds with the deeply ambitious man Ederus knew. He could not quite put his finger on it, but something was off kilter here, and there was that; that *something* in their eyes which bothered him. He barely knew Galan's brother, but the threat to his own fortress further south had been nullified by this great defensive campaign of his, and yet, Wrad's champion; Elgan's eyes were shifty too. Ederus shook his head. His exhaustion was clearly clouding his judgement and he turned away with a scowl, heading for a big steaming cauldron of mead which Erran had just beaten him to, armed with his favourite auroch horn

cup and a broad smile. The boy's indomitable spirit changed his scowl to a matching smile in that instant and Ederus nodded his thanks to the lad, relishing the glorious, sweet heat of the excellent Epidian mead. The priests prayed over and then declared war on the food, and Galedon's hungry soldiers needed no further encouragement either and they spread out, approaching the tables of food and drink around this arena like deadly hunters. These Galedonians could not disguise their undeniable delight, and the exhausted aristocracy, its warriors and the priesthood alike began to devour the food, mead and the beer faster than the perspiring cooks and stewards could replace it. Many of the stewards stood agape as a year's food and provisions vanished before their eyes, and the only sounds they could hear were those of chewing, groans of pleasure and burping.

As this army settled down for the night and the celebrations faded, the orange disc of Bel had long sunk below the huge shadow of Mull on the western horizon. The high king, his vassal kings, princes and the gŵyrd of Galedon filled the great hall of Prince Galan, and the central hearth was a huge blaze, warming all within. The massive oak beams above them were blackened with age but intricately carved with swirling, galloping horses and knotwork which were just discernible still. The many corners and joints to the sculpted roof timbers above this garrulous host had been adorned with the skulls of long dead gelyn, visited now only by the family of sparrows living in the thatch. Amphorae of Italian and Galliad wine shared the head table with a large and finely made silver cauldron decorated with a circle of galloping horses around its belly, and which until very recently had been filled with strong mead. The feasting was done, englyns sung, bold stories told, and the great recounting of battle had been enjoyed by everyone here. All had eaten and drunk far too much, and the drowsy, noble combrogi of Galedon now relaxed in the smoky sanctuary of this famous and lavish great hall, comforted by the warm glow of strong drink and the even warmer fellowship of trusted friends. Three accomplished musicians played their harps in a beautifully syncopated, haunting melody in one corner, and many heads began to

drop and eyelids droop as this glorious, unforgettable day came to an end. All preparations for tomorrow's long journey back to Ederus' capital of CaerCamelon were complete, and so it was entirely in the hands of Fwlch and Taranu the all-powerful Gods of Prydeinig weather. Some of these warriors began to snore, and all missed the surreptitious exit of Prince Wrad of the 'black-horse' Epidiau and his sullen champion, as both had left Prince Galan's great hall silently by a side door.



Chapter Six.

AucHur the arch-druid of Breged took his place behind the great oak throne of King Bellnor, carved generations ago and vividly painted by a true artisan into an eagle swooping, wings spread, and the muscular legs and talons gripping a mountain hare made the broad seat. This old and sacred throne sat centrally on the raised dais at the back of this great hall, and AucHur nodded carefully to Crown Prince Cartysman ap Bellnor, who sat easily on his own beautifully carved *orsedd isaf* or 'lesser throne' at the furthest side of this broad platform. Cartysman's narrow face echoed Bellnor's features but with only a fraction of the character. That young prince's eyes were those of his late mother's, and they reflected the same jaded boredom that AucHur had always seen in her eyes when she had still been in this world. That young man's unfeeling eyes and his harsh, pinched features betrayed the over-indulged, deeply privileged young prince's inner self. Cartysman was intelligent, immoral and occasionally quite reckless, especially with other people's feelings and their property. AucHur also knew him to be highly opinionated and deeply ambitious; traits which have never sat well together to produce a healthy outcome in the druid's lugubrious opinion. He worried about the inevitable and pivotal clash with Bellnor which was yet to come, but he knew it could not be too far ahead in the future. They had already locked horns about his allowance and his frequent hunting trips, but mostly about Cartysman's continual petitioning for stewardship of their secondary fortress of DunRheadr, situated over twenty miles north and barely five hundred reeds from a fine bend in the powerful afon Ympryd. Nant Ympryd is a hunter's paradise, being hugely popular by the werrin too, where many travel not only to fish for huge salmon in the wild and rushing cataracts of the Ympryd but to see the *cerrig y corlan*, the famous and dumbfounding 'folding stones' nearby. DunRheadr is a wealthy caer, surrounded by lush pastures, thick forests and rolling hills. Bellnor knew the huge challenges

of running such a busy military fort and its surrounding region intimately, and he also knew that his selfish son was not up to the task, sharing this woeful opinion with his arch-druid often. In Bellnor's sorrowful but private opinion, his son was ill-prepared for overall control of that demanding region. However, AuchHur knew the high king was not yet ready to deliver this cataclysmic blow to his son and heir, fearing the certain backlash. In the arch-druid's equally private opinion, Cartysman was not up to overall control of anything larger than a platoon of men, and even then he would have the impetuous little snake monitored. He knew however that Cartysman was well aware of his opinion of him as he surreptitiously regarded the young prince now, also knowing that the king could only put that inevitable confrontation off for so long. Cartysman tilted his head at the druid, seeming to perceive his covert assessment, and he gave him a bold, arrogant look which then hardened to one of spiteful malice. AuchHur tactfully looked away, turning his gaze upwards to the darkly yellowed and lichen encrusted thatching above his tonsured head. The maze of timber roof supports above this tall druid were enormous, fully carved oak trees, and the designs of the Bregantau carved upon them were wondrous and animated, long faded into uniform and amber darkness now from the countless fires below them. AuchHur lowered his eyes again and let them sweep the dais behind him, ignoring Cartysman. Long, colourfully woven tapestries hung from the high stone wall at the back of this great hall, covering the doors to the extended chambers beyond, and these heavy woollen drapes bore the great woven talisman of Breged; the swooping spread eagle. Around this main battle banner were stitched the six individual cygils of Bellnor's vassal princedoms which make up his midland alliance. The *leaping-deer* of the Carfetau and the *stalking-wolf* cygil of the Lupocarau shared this huge flag with the ancient *bronze-sword* of the Paurisau, all woven in around the left of the great *eagle* of Breged. To its right were sewn the curving *war-horn* cygil of the Cornafau Calon, the *bow and crossed-arrows* of the Segantau, and the *giant-oak* of the people of Gabrantoficaeu sat alongside the mighty tribe of the Coritanau's striking *viper* design, and all these emblems of tribal pride

were brightly woven into the very fabric of allied honour. Another large, tall backed and baronial chair sat to the left of Bellnor's massive oaken *orsedd* on this dais, but this stout chair was empty. The druid moved to stand to one side of it, his eyes flicking restlessly across the many rugged faces of these assembled combrogi, but he could not pick out the one person he most wanted to see tonight. His frustration was evident as his tansured brow was speckled with glistening beads of sweat and he could not quite stand still, fidgeting constantly with the heavy looking, moon shaped crescent of gold that hung on a thick chain around his neck. All these expectant people before him awaited something which most knew nothing about but wait they all did. Three beautifully gilded *telyn* were being strummed in a corner with real virtue, and this soul soothing and melodious harp music was accompanied by three accomplished reed players, each with a different sized flute. These popular musicians entertained these warriors, their great lords and the gŵyrd of Breged here assembled as they drank and gossiped whilst waiting, here in the smoky and beery atmosphere of King Bellnor's great hall.

This vast Bregantan fortress was built long ago atop a low hill and in the centre of this broad northern territory, cleverly controlling the river crossing and the main north-south road running through the very heart of Breganta and Breged. Moreover, an extremely ancient and sacred site nearby represented *Calon Prydein* itself to this nations' druidry, bestriding the holiest of all crossroads and being the very physical and spiritual *heart* of this great country of kingdoms. This Bregedian capital citadel also commands the fecund green corridor of fro Uswr in more secular, military fashion, lying as it does between the Derwent Hills of Rhôs y Gogledd to the east and the Hills of Nudd to the west, whilst nestled in a protective, bow shaped curve of Arglwydd afon Uswr. Bellnor's immense capital had become thronged, and all had answered the call of the Bregantan king without exception as he ruled this huge and powerful federation of Breged with an iron grip. This ancient, sprawling fortress was encircled by three, steep-sided, deep and wide ditches, all surrounding a high earthen wall. These solid battlement walls about CaerUswr were tall

and impressive, topped with a fearsome palisade and studded with watch towers. Thirty long, oval thatches of the gŵyrd shared that high enclosure with the king's great hall within, and all its attendant buildings were spread about the inner maes. Over four hundred more, round thatches of the werrin were huddled on the flatlands around this huge walled caer on the hill and around the great timber bridge over the adjacent river, on which two ox carts could pass each other with ease once through the tollgates. Commanding the north-western corner of the inner courtyard of this impressive caer stood Bellnor's long and oval great hall with its low, curving and heavy thatching, which had blackened and thickened with moss over the years, but inside it was dry, it was warm and it was packed to the wattles.

Two religious stewards appeared from one side of the huge main tapestry and joined the druid on the dais at the back of this great hall. One whispered in Auchur's ear before taking his place behind him, and whatever news he had received, it did not improve the druid's frustration one bit. He seemed to be struggling with a great problem as his tonsured brow creased in thought, dislodging several beads of sweat to set them racing down his face, leaving tracks on his cheeks which glistened in the firelight. Auchur's face relaxed a little then as the faint thunder of approaching horses at the main gates could be heard, causing most of the people in this hall to sit up and to turn to look at the door. The priest turned to the stewards behind him and gave them some quiet instruction, before stepping down from the dais and striding forward to pass between the long tables and benches. These were thronged tonight with hard faced females or long haired, bearded and moustached warriors, all assembled in their finery of new mantles and bracs. Large logs of beer were scattered on the tables in front of them, surrounded by the crumbs and remnants of a recent meal. There was not one empty seat, and even the walls were filled with standing onlookers. The druid approached the great oak door to this hall when it was flung wide open, and the man he had been waiting for all evening finally arrived. Auchur smiled broadly for the first time today as the familiar, unmistakeably large and athletic figure of King Lludd

ap Beli Mawr entered the hall, exuding his usual self-confidence and physical prowess. AuchHur moved to welcome him as the assembly around him broke into the well-known chant at this man's clearly unexpected appearance, and Bellnor's great and ancient hall boomed with the famous salutation and this fearsome warrior's infamous name; 'Lludd Llaw Ereint! Lludd Llaw Ereint! Lludd Llaw Ereint!' These warriors bellowed at the tops of their voices and banged their beer logs on the tables in welcome rhythm and respectful greeting, as Lludd 'silver hand'; the legendary champion and Gorddofic king-dewin of the Khumry and the famous son and heir to Beli Mawr himself had come amongst them. This unimpeachable man was first issue to Beli Mawr; the late but immortalised *Uthr Pendragon* of Prydein, named for his Godly ancestors Belenos Hên, Belinus, Bil and ultimately Bel, who with his Queen Sulis on his arm drives the sun across the sky in his war carbad each day. All here were in awe at this warrior's glorious *bri*, as no man alive could claim the lineage and the honours of this preeminent king, except of course his three surviving brothers. AuchHur clasped this famous royal warrior's left hand in warm welcome as they were old friends. As Lludd's three burly Essyllwyr companions found places to stand in this crowded hall, the druid led his guest through the smoke and between the rows of cheering and table-thumping warriors to the dais. The pair of huge Bregantan royal guards came to attention at the front of the dais as the famed King Lludd of the Khumry approached King Bellnor on his marvellous winged throne. Bellnor nodded, smiling broadly from his eagle throne before holding up his hand, and the raucous chanting and laughter in his hall petered out as order was returned. This tall, athletic looking warrior-king paused at the mark of *parth y brenin*; the white ash and sculpted silver rod which was attached to the ground, and which delineated the limit of this 'king's zone' exactly nine feet from Bellnor's throne as expected, but the king of Breged waved him forwards.

"There is no need for the 'ris y rhi' formalities between us King Lludd ap Beli Mawr!" Bellnor told him affably, referring to the ancient presentation ceremony of Brythonic monarchs where all must pause at the mark, but

where another king was entitled to take one step further than all others. "You honour my hall with your royal presence, and it's good to see you again after so long. We have awaited your arrival this day so we may deliberate on the latest intelligences we have received and much more." Bellnor said in a gruff but friendly tone as he stood. "Please take your place of honour at my side Lord Lludd." He offered, indicating the big and baronial chair beside him.

Lludd stepped lightly onto the platform, inverted his grip and shook his host's hand in warm greeting. Lludd gave Bellnor's son Cartysman the briefest of nods before taking his seat and facing the many smiling faces he recognised in this crowd of hairy or sharp faced, beer-swilling soldiers before him. Lludd had known many of them for years and had fought a number of battles alongside some of them, even against a few. Behind him, AucHur nodded to the steward at the back of this dais and the man slipped away, to vanish behind the huge tapestries.

"Wine!" Bellnor yelled, his spirit immeasurably lifted by the arrival of this long travelled but eminently powerful Khumric ally. "Wine for silver-hand!" He roared, and two arwein scampered to compete for the honour. The silver hand in question was a beautifully carved piece of work fashioned from pure Khumric silver, and it took the place of the real hand Lludd had lost many years previously at the age of seventeen. This stunning silver prosthetic had been created as a closed fist with prominent knuckles, which allowed him good use of it. He had even killed with it.

A mercenary had been tasked with cutting off Prince Lludd's sword hand those years ago with magic and a drowsing potion. The mutilation and reduction of a promising and aristocratic young warrior had been successfully carried out while he had been locked in a drug induced sleep of a vast and black emptiness. However, Lludd's sword hand had always been his left, an uncommon but accepted trait, and the best sword mentors of the Khumry had encouraged this rather than attempting to change it as it was a natural and unchosen inclination. That treacherous mercenary had paid with his life for his error, as his employer had

extracted the ultimate price for the blunder. That same vainglorious, fame hungry commissioner of the black deed had joined his hired mercenary in the Underworld soon after Lludd had discovered his identity. The young Gorddofican prince had taken great pleasure in demonstrating the man's mistake with his all-powerful left hand, even as the stump of his right arm was still swathed in bloody bandages. Shocked at his undoing by magic and poison, the young Prince Lludd had been determined then to never fall foul of it again, and in this endeavour had travelled immediately to CaerBraint in Môn as soon as he had gained his revenge, where at the *Plâs y Dewin* in Llanddona, he had remained for nine long and arduous years in training, or so he had thought at the time.

The metal hand now strapped to Lludd's muscular right forearm had been fashioned by the best *aerwyr* in Essyllyr so that it could be eased around the handle of most Brythonic shields. That aged but accomplished jeweller had crooked the little finger, allowing a horse's reins to be hooked securely to it and then wrapped around the cold silver fingers of his new *llaw-aes*, or 'shield-hand'. It enabled this fearsome warrior to do mounted battle with very little, if any disability. In single combat on foot Lludd was unmatched still, and the long row of gold and silver, triple-lobed studs in his black leather belt were testament to the champions he had dispatched to the Underworld, the more important of which he still kept the heads in barrels, embalmed in cedar oil. These noble heads he had removed with his fabled blade; *Llafn-gweddu*, the ancient, silver gilded sword his high king father had personally given him, with its powerful runes and its swirling, sacred symbols was priceless. 'Widow-blade' hung now from his right hip, and the famous silver-hammer pommel of this legendary blade glinted with its malevolent promise. This renowned Khumric warrior bore no ink as he was a Gorddofic and one of the ruling class of the otherwise heavily tattooed Essyllwyr. Lludd Llaw Ereint had grown to be a Khumric legend of almost Godlike status, becoming one of the most feared champions in Prydein, second only to the champion of all Prydein with a blade; his younger brother Nynniaw. King Lludd of House Gorddofica was now in his prime, and he sported the huge, bristling and drooping

moustaches much loved by the warriors of Khumry. The face above this arch of stiff black hair was hard, weather-beaten and it was full of character. Its focus was a long and aquiline nose framed by high cheekbones, and his tough looking face was favoured by intelligent and sparkling blue eyes which beamed out below bushy black eyebrows. Below his impressive, matching moustaches protruded a lantern jaw and which shaved bulwark gave insight to this man's inflexible character. Lludd's hooded mantle was a new and dark, black and damson weave which was clasped by the most beautifully chased silver brooch, cast into the stylised yet infamous war-hammer cygil of his House. Another solid silver Gorddofican war-hammer hung around his neck, and on a silver chain so heavy it would fatigue a mortal man in minutes. His bracs were of the same dark, high-quality weave and were tucked into polished but dusty black riding boots of exceptional quality. His long and plaited, raven-black hair hung over his left shoulder as was fashionable these days, and it was tied with a leather lace, the tips secured by a pair of miniature hammer-shaped silver terminals. The hammer-headed and deeply embossed, white gold torc at his throat glinted richly in the flickering light of this great hall, and Lludd Llaw Ereint relaxed in the big and comfortable chair at its head, beaming his spectacular geniality at the assembly before him. There was no mistaking the aura of danger about this impressive looking man, and his broad smile showed white teeth which competed with his silver right hand, gleaming now in his lap. He was brought a beautiful ox-horn cup with a chased silver lip which was filled from a demi-amphora of fine Galliad wine by a steward, who then stood behind his great sculpted chair in continued service. As Lludd washed the road dust from his throat with the excellent wine, the hubbub of conversations in this great hall had resumed, merging into one murmuring sound, but this too faded to silence as a drum began to beat from some hidden location. It pounded a heartbeat, double rhythm for long minutes, and all conversation died as three small triplet girls then filed out from behind the tapestry, walking around to the front of the dais in a very strange and staccato manner. Two male uati, hidden at the sides

of the hall drew back the drapes of their positions at these girls' appearance so that two shafts of bright, flickering golden light shone onto these renown uati triplets. They blazed from two opposing torches in their alcoves which until that moment had been covered but were still concealed from the audience. A concave dish of highly polished electrum was mounted behind each brightly burning torch, allowing the light to be focused somewhat and directed.

Some gasps of superstition and fear were heard from these assembled warriors, and many kissed an iron arm or finger ring almost without thought as these infamous little girls were suddenly bathed in a muted golden light. The atmosphere in this hall had switched in that instant to one of religious awe and spiritual fear, and the tension was suddenly palpable. All eyes were wide and fixed compulsively to those three identical, elfin girls who had appeared in silence and were dressed in the short white gowns of their order. Tiaras of mistletoe sat atop their long, straight hair as black as wet coal and which hung below their waists. All other uati had shaved heads, but these girls were very different. These sacred triplets were identical in every way, but one wore a tiara of red berried mistletoe, one had snow white berries in her crown and the third wore a twisted circlet of the rare and imported, black berried mistletoe. Their every word and action identical, but each delayed in turn by the smallest fraction of a moment. They moved in the same precise way; 1-2-3 in complete silence and with a fluid, unconscious grace. They seemed to glide serenely over the ground as one spirit entity, until they came to stand before Bellnor on his huge throne: 1, 2 and 3.

Cerwen, Corsen and Cragen; the sacred triplet girls of the Bregantau's druid's order of Uati seemed to glow in this flickering but focused light, which illuminated the front of the dais and in which the pupils in their vacant eyes were black and enormous, seeing nothing, seeing all. Two hidden hands sprinkled a finely ground mineral onto the two concealed but bright torches in the corners and the light before the dais suddenly turned a vivid blue. This suddenly Gods-struck triad of uati turned to face

the audience then, and they began to speak bathed in this unnatural light, and the tension in the hall racked up.

“Brigida! Brigida! Brigida! Draw near and hear our divination!” They spoke in their unnerving, staggered way of talking 1, 2, 3. “All combrogi and cefnder of Breged and Prydein heed this prophecy now, or all you know and all you love will be consumed.” They uttered these prophetic words in their unsettling manner, and the silence in this hall was profound. “The red and silver beast devours our cefndr in Gallia as a wolf devours a crèche, and the wolf of Rhyfain *will* cross our sacred Môr Udd!” They sang when they spoke, but each started a hairsbreadth after the another, and the sound was so confusing, this powerful magic struck terror into all who witnessed their foretelling. There were a few more secular and less superstitious warriors in this gathering however, and they began to make rumbling noises of protest at this shocking declaration now, including Cadlywydd Cadallan ap Cadall. This was a powerful general and the leader of the fearsome Carfetau, and this huge prime warrior was surrounded by his retinue of green cloaked warrior guards. The warriors of the deer and most in this hall were struck dumb by the portent in these words, but also by their staggered, confusing delivery. Cadallan seemed more angry than confused, however.

The girls continued to prophesise under the glow of those hidden lamps, and although his heart had quickened at the powerful spiritual aspect of these girls, Lludd remained relaxed and aloof in his chair, as he had witnessed the ovates Cerwen, Corsen and Cragen prophesise before and was considered a *canny* man himself. Lludd knew the trick was to focus on the words of Cragen, the last one to speak. It was a simple matter to discern the smudged and stammered words then, but he had seen many a grown man piss his bracs and quake in his war boots at the sight and sound of these ghostly, Gods-struck triplets.

“The red and silver beast of Rhyfain will subdue all Brythons and will come to rule this sacred land for many centuries to come!” They stuttered this astonishing prophesy, and the Carfetan general stood up then and

thumped his fists to the table, his huge, pale and rugged face betraying his blazing fury at this appalling spoken prospect, but he remained silent, clearly struggling to hold his tongue. "The seventh century of Rhyfain marks the beginning of our defeat, and the beast will then rest, but time will pass, and we will be brought low by his issue! Thus, many Brythons will pass over the bridge of swords to the Underworld and all Prydein will kneel before the red beast and pay many long years of harsh and painful tribute!" They sung this dreadful outlook in their tremulous, hesitant way and with their huge eyes blank and bottomless black.

The consternation in this hall spread, and more outrage was voiced at these unbelievable, even treasonous words. Auchur had to interrupt them and take a step forward to remind all present that these girls were merely a conduit to the Gods, and the words they heard were the words of the Gods speaking through these children. It had the desired effect as the hubbub died away somewhat, apart from the tables of the Carfetau whose fearsome warriors remained standing, outraged and protesting still. It was they who always protested the loudest, as these northern warriors were the fiercest tribes of all Breged in battle. These cataclysmic words were just too much for them to accept as no force on this earth could command them to kneel and to capitulate. Every man, woman and child of the Carfetau would die in defence of this principle as everyone here knew. The warriors of the leaping-deer began to pound the tables with their fists in support of their general and at the unacceptable words of this heinous prophecy regardless of these uati girls' reputations, and these three diminutive prophets turned to face them: 1, 2 and 3.

Cerwen, Corsen and Cragen pointed their empty, soulless eyes through the smoke at the Carfetau, clearly targeting the powerful Cadlywydd Cadallan and his men and changing the atmosphere in this packed hall in a flash. The girls held up their hands with the outer fingers extended making the *bull* and each forming the sacred number eleven, sixty-six being a powerful, irrefutable magic. Their left legs bent then at the knees and the soles of their bare feet came to rest inside their right knees, 1-2-

3, and abruptly, these little girls were standing rock still on one thin white leg, making a triad, and their empty eyes were huge. This terrifying, triadic aspect stunned these standing warriors to shut their mouths, and the hair rose visibly on their arms as they were brushed by the Gods into silence. All sat down swallowing nervously including their general, as this spiritual force that pressed heavily down on them now could not be challenged. As the Carfetau retook their seats with wide eyes, this weighty force relented, and the girls gained both their feet once more and turned gracefully away, one, two and three. Facing the nobility on the dais again, they continued with their mesmerising speech and in absolute silence from the chastened masses behind, as the light of the Gods which bathed them had suddenly turned a magical shade of green.

“In seventh triumphant hubris will play, and arrogance will dance great Rhi Bellnor, and treason will be the puppet master. Foreign gold will shine, and eyes will glint, brother will slay brother and Brython will betray Brython as the wolf so desires!”

Another outburst of indignant protest from the Carfetau followed these appalling words and which rose noticeably. This rising objection then faded suddenly, and it died away completely as hidden fingers had sprinkled once more. In a single heartbeat, the triplets were at once bathed in a dread glow of bright, fresh blood crimson and the crowd were again struck dumb behind them. Cerwen, Corsen and Cragen continued without pause in the bloody glare of this shocked silence, and they turned back around now, 1-2-3 to address this stunned audience.

“Undeb Prydein must be achieved with the rites of *llwgwaed*, as this holy and sacred unity will please the Gods and secure the future of our descendants to come. We must come together as one, join our hips and our thighs, lock shields and raise our glittering swords. We must endure as it is this blessed quality that outweighs all, and lucky it is that the combrogi of Prydein endure like no other people. It is in our blood to endure and to survive, which has come down to us from the countless generations of our cherished ancestors. Without Undeb all will perish!”

One two and three, their strange, unnerving speaking stopped, and the ensuing silence was profound. Cerwen, Corsen and Cragen then turned consecutively and slowly to their left then 1-2-3 and filed across the face of the dais, just as the red glow around them faded away in the breathless hush of this hall. As they returned as one to the back wall and the door in the righthand corner with their steps matching precisely and their bare feet hitting exactly the same marks on these flags, you could have heard a beard comb drop to them in the eerie vacuum of silence which followed these three little girls like a swirling vortex. As the final, diminutive and white gowned figure of Cragen passed beyond the tapestry like a ghost, the great hall of King Bellnor ap Capoir erupted into a bellowing clamour of raised voices. Many warriors began shouting and arguing with each other, and as is entirely common and very much expected in any Brythonic quarrel there was much aggressive gesticulating, name-calling and a great belligerent waving of arms in the smoky haze, especially around the tables of the garrulous Carfetau.

“Order, order!” Bellnor bellowed at these jostling and confrontational warriors squabbling between the benches before him, but even his loud voice could not be heard above the din.

Lludd Llaw Ereint stood slowly then, and a vacant expression took hold of his rugged face. As the high king of the Khumry visibly retreated from his angular features, the *brif-dewin* of Prydein took his place with glittering eyes, opening his mouth. What ushered from below the great black arch of moustaches was at first a sound like a spring rill, which then grew to a babbling brook. He took another great chest full of air then and continued to emanate this *fell* sound without pause. It swelled to a rushing stream over a pebble-strewn bed, and louder still, until it was a roaring river in full spring flood. Some men and women near to the dais turned to stare agog at this awesome and thunderous sound pouring from that tall, black and silver wizard on the dais, and they stood looking up with their mouths and eyes wide open. The gŵyrd of the Carfetau still argued and yelled at each other however as they were ever warlike and quarrelsome. In the next

heartbeat, this great hall was filled with the terrifying sounds of a branch and boulder filled avalanche of water, cracking and crashing loudly over a rocky cliff, and its shocking, booming uproar shook the very air in this hall. All in it became still and awestruck, to turn and to gaze wide-eyed and terrified at the Lord Brif-Dewin of Gorddofica and all Prydein, as in all his black and silver glory he had revealed a small chink of his astonishing powers.

King Lludd ap Beli Mawr had been brought up as a Gorddofic prince, and that family had been recognised throughout history as a ruling line of sovereigns, but also as kings of the druids. These mountaineers from northern Khumry are today the intellectual aristocracy of that nation, being the motherland of a proud Prydein. The Gorddoficau proudly hold the *rheolwr y grym* over that nation's tribes and are now too the military force of the druids across Prydein, known as their '*aer y derwydd*' since the separation. Lludd and all Prydein knew that his revered and irreplaceable father would be the last to hold the dual role. Beli Mawr would be the last *penodiad deuol*; both high king of Prydein *and* king of the druids, as this country's priesthood had evolved from necessity since that calamity. The Druidry of Prydein had become independent of sovereignty and any secular influence over the intervening years and have become much more powerful. Some of these Gorddofican nobles are chosen to be druid trained themselves and in a truly ancient order, usually the surplus male princes of Gorddofican royal families. This intense and unforgiving training of body, mind and soul takes nineteen years, and to become one of these fabled wizard-warriors the druids called *Dewin*, the acolytes had to pay a price very few were able or willing to pay. One in a thousand were able to cope with the martial, mental and the spiritual demands that were constant and unending on the students, making eye-watering rates of attrition. Lludd had hammered on the great gates of CaerBraint in Llanddona soon after he had lost his right hand, demanding admission, and he had not just qualified to become one of them, this primary son of Beli Mawr had quickly proved himself to be far superior to any dewin they had ever trained before. Nine long and challenging years

he had toiled within that fortress of the dewin, and nine long and hard winters he had endured inside its fearsome walls. He had been a completely changed man when he had eventually passed back out of those great black gates, but in reality it had been just three years later. Ten more years of training had remained, but this done in the real world and in real time. However, this fearsome man had completed his training as a wizard-warrior some years previously, and Lludd Llaw Ereint, as accommodating and as sociable as he was infamous was the most fearsome weapon in and of himself, and none knew his true capabilities, except perhaps his brothers and his life-long mentor and teacher; HênDdu.

As a truly shocked silence gripped the people in this hall and the bedlam died in a heartbeat, it was replaced by a dumbstruck awe reflected on the faces of all. The noise that issued from Lludd's open mouth began to abate then and was soon a calming, babbling brook once more. The sound then died away completely, leaving a stunned audience in the intense stillness of its wake. The seconds stretched ominously, and rain could be heard dripping from the thatch and splashing into the ring ditch outside, and every eye was locked to this fearsome king-dewin on the dais. Nobody uttered a word, and it seemed as though every soul in this great hall were holding their breath, locked in a kind of terrified anticipation of the utterly unknown. Dewin departed and high king returned, Lludd paled with the effort it had taken, and his left hand found the arm of the chair before he sat breathing deeply. The tension in this hall was suddenly released, and a hubbub of excited gossip burst from these astonished warriors into the shocking silence.

"Who will form this llwgwaed?" Came a low but powerful voice from a dark corner, and in stark contrast to the chattering.

All heads turned to see Queen Morgu in the shadows, the warrior chieftain of the infamous Effwrog stronghold of CaerEbor; capital fortress of the Paurisau on Breged's wild eastern borderlands. She stepped forward into the light, and her ruined face was the first thing everyone saw. It had

been thus since a Jute raider had tried to remove her head many years ago. Her lightning reactions at the time had saved her life and had kept her noble head where it belonged, but the fight had left a huge wound to the left side of her mouth and face. It was still a horror of twisted pink flesh, and her teeth grinned permanently through the folded cicatrices twisting one side of her torn mouth. Queen Morgu wore a weathered, much used armour of a fine old design, and she bore the swirling and now faded blue tattoos and iron arm rings of the warrior. Most looked next at the dazzling cape of peacock feathers she wore over her armour, and the myriad colours were bewitching in the firelight, flashing in rainbow waves like oil on water as she moved. The enormous gold torc around her broad neck was usually the next focus of people's attention as it was a thing of rare and stunning beauty. It had been carved in the sacred and ancient, flowing style of the honourable Paurisa, second only to the Eceniau in their creative powers over the noble metals. This retired but still ferocious queen clutched a knobbly cane of hazel in her left hand and shifted her weight with an ugly wince, betraying the fact that her fighting days were long over. Her power and influence remained however, and so she had been included in the royal summons which had criss-crossed this huge territory of Breged. With just two burly personal guards in attendance, Queen Morgu had ridden her charger here the twenty or so miles southwest to represent her people, and she was determined to do just that.

"HênDdu and I will form the sacred and required blood-oath honourable Queen Morgu, gwraig Ebor ap Ebrawc!" Lludd answered her, giving her full and respectful title. He stood once more and bowed deeply and respectfully to this matriarch of the formidable Paurisau, who bowed just as deeply in return in her stilted way.

"We are deeply honoured lord King Lludd ap Beli Mawr." Morgu replied neutrally but with equal respect. "But we may not be in need of such a sacred oath so soon if what was just prophesied by the uati is accurate!" She added with a horrific scowl and in her strange, musical accent,

causing confusion to show on many of the surrounding faces. “The Roman’s seventh century is not until *next* year, as this is the six hundred and ninety ninth year since the founding of that great and foul citadel!” She grimaced, pointing out the inherent problem in the uati’s divinations, and the queen of the Paurisau stirred up a swell of consternation in this hall with her wet and slightly slurred words. Lludd seemed to have recovered quickly, and he turned to AuchHur behind the king’s throne in respect, and the druid nodded his tonsured head in invitation and assent. Lludd turned back to the queen in that dark corner and to the assembled chieftains and gŵyrd of this Bregedian alliance before him, and he raised his chin.

“I cannot speak for the Gods honourable Queen Morgu as none here can, and maybe *their* reckoning to the foundation of Rome is different from our own or even the Romans’, who knows. But, however we humans count these years, the Gods, our spies and our own common sense all tell us that General Gaius Julius Caesar is coming *this* year whatever its number! I *can* speak for myself and for my people however when I give you my unbroken word, that all the signs point to Caesar coming *this* autumn. I am sure he will launch his invasion close on the heels of this coming Lughnas, and my people are preparing for his arrival.” He answered Morgu’s question as truthfully as he could and bowed again in finality to the Paurisian matriarch. This seemed to placate many people in the hall and to many appreciative nods. “Clearly we cannot leave our fate to chance, and so you must all swear the sacred oath of unity before all our Gods.” He added quickly, returning his focus to the massed warriors on the benches and around these painted walls. “I will take your promises to HênDdu myself, and together we will form this great national blood-oath that must be sworn. As the future prophecy you all heard tonight from the uati triplets is perhaps the worst imaginable and our worst nightmare, yet it is just one such future we may have to face if we do nothing. There are many possible outcomes, all of them uncertain, but we must take action to strive toward the future of our own choosing!” He stated boldly, exuding a supreme self-confidence that was entirely infectious. He was

forced to take a modest pause here as the beer logs began crashing on the tables again, and they gave a somewhat erratic tempo to his chanted name this time. When the din had subsided enough, Lludd straightened and continued to address these once violently disparate tribesmen and women, bowing his head in acknowledgement of the Carfetau and their infamous general at the centre of this agitated crowd. "Above all, you, the families and the combrogi of Breged must come together as one people as you have never done before, and more; you *must* join with Galedon and Albion in this most sacred triad!" He demanded of them all, continuing his cold scrutiny of the rows of rapt faces before him. "I meet with HênDdu at Beltain, and we will have the sacred words of our *llwgwaed* ready for the taking of your great blood-oath, at Lug's own sacred festival three months later. Whether it is this year or the next, no commander of sane mind would attempt invasion in winter, and we believe the Roman braggart will be kept busy by the Germanic and Galliad tribes throughout this coming spring and most of the summer. But from this moment onwards we must put aside our petty squabbles, our feuds and our ancient land disputes, and we must open our hearts to those who were once deadly enemy. We must put the reckoning of lost comrades away and behind us for this unifying imperative to succeed. But know this combrogi; the *llwgwaed* must be taken with a pure heart, or the bridge of swords to the Underworld will be closed forever to any fool who breaks it or takes it with a false heart." He informed all in this hall bleakly, and his cold blue eyes glittered their ferocious challenge in explicit support of this oath. Cadallan caught his eye at that fraught moment, nodding his support almost imperceptibly, and Lludd honoured him in return with a cursory nod of his own. Satisfied that the most onerous demand had been made of these powerful people and received by them without open rebellion, Lludd took another deep breath. There was some head nodding and a low muttering of agreement from many sage heads following these wise but portentous words including the influential Carfetau, and so Lludd ploughed on, knowing that he had their undivided attention. He began to speak more softly now, forcing them to listen, and yet his quiet words

carried clearly to the very front of this great hall. The atmosphere had changed again too, and it was now charged with an electric and vital energy that grew as the import of tonight's gathering began to sink in for the majority. "I truly believe these Roman conquerors are coming to Prydein, precisely when is another matter, but we have all heard the harrowing tales of our cefnder in Gallia and elsewhere, and how they have been butchered without mercy or let." Lludd's voice began to rise again now. "Many ancient and noble bloodlines were lost forever in that slaughter, as those Roman king-killers think that they are Gods put on this earth to do as they please, and there is not a grain of mercy in any of them!" He told them these well-known facts simply, and all were now nodding and rumbling in agreement. "We Brythons also know that they are corrupt to the core, and that the primary motive of Caesar the wolf of Rome is to rescue his own ruined political career and to pay off his massive debts!" A swell of ribald abuse and lurid scorn rose from these gathered warriors at these base motives, and Lludd nodded in support of their condemnation. "We Prydeinig know from long experience and bitter history that the pursuit of greatness always courts failure, and above all things these Romans are men, and men as we all know are fallible!" He said this with feeling and in his penetrating voice. The gŵyrd of Breged began to beat the tabletops with their logs again. He let them bang and shout for a minute before lifting his silver hand, and the silence was almost immediate.

"We have also heard with heavy hearts, how the arch-druids and a few of the leading royal Houses of Gallia called to unite the many kingdoms in that great land, to enjoin and together repel Caesar's red and silver machine of conquest. The call came from HênDdu himself with Gallia and Prydein's great council of arch-druids in complete support, but that great and august body of holy men and women could not turn that bloodthirsty Roman maniac with their powers as his foreign Gods were too powerful. Yet, they failed too to inspire and gain the vital and crucial Galliad *undeb* they so desperately needed!" Lludd admitted morosely and with a shake of his head. AuchHur behind him looked uncomfortable at this infamous

knowledge as he had been present at that huge assembly and the sacred call to arms and unity in Gallia, but he kept his eyes lowered and his mouth shut as Lludd continued without a glance his way.

“The fault lies not in our religion but perhaps in our greed, as many kings and princes in both Gallia and Prydein believed wrongly that Caesar would return to Rome when he had won enough plunder and enough reputation. Sadly, the truth of the matter is old habits die hard, and so most of Gallia’s kings, princes and their nobles used the chaos to manoeuvre for more power, position or land.” Lludd told these people this with a vehement condemnation in his tone, allowing a blaze to flash in his eyes. “Had they achieved the unity demanded by ours and their own priesthood, no force on this earth could have conquered the countless warriors of our Galliad combrogi, but they squandered the opportunity to unite and to organise themselves properly, leaving the ruling families to do all the fighting, and all the dying! And as we have come to learn, they paid the ultimate price for their selfish ambitions, and those vassal rulers through their greed and their cowardice condemned their own werrin to servitude and death.” He finished darkly, looking sharply at his audience, conveying the import of his words by his indomitable will and the implacable look on his hard face. He knew he had them in the palm of his hand now, and every person in this great hall hung on each word as if they were links of pure silver dropping from the thatch.

“This will *not* happen in Prydein!” Lludd Llaw Ereint declared sternly, his blue eyes flashing dangerously. “THIS WILL NOT HAPPEN IN PRYDEIN!” He repeated with an amplified roar, allowing more power for these six words, and they echoed around this hall as if imbued with a life and a demanding voice of their own. The warriors of Breged roared back, hammering the tables once more in shared covenant and with their faces flushed with the hot emotions building in them all now. “This land is the sacred birthplace of our culture and the crucible of our religion, as we all know.” He continued as the noise abated. “Countless centuries and countless generations, all piled one on top of another, and we must honour the

memory of our innumerable ancestors, those who gave their lives so that we can live ours today.” Lludd told them more sombrely, but then he stood more erect as he looked around at these warriors, catching again the eyes of Cadallan and many other familiar veterans before him. “We *will* make this sacred triad of the three great federations of northern Prydein! We *will* honour our ancestors, and we will show them that their powerful blood still runs red and hot in these veins!” He shook his muscular sword arm at them, his voice rising again now and with the volume increasing once more as his warrior spirit awakened fully. “Your esteemed Houses *will* come together, and then you will join my sacred host of Khumric Houses, as we have already signed our llwgwaed in our own hot blood. Then, together my fine combrogi, we will ally with the Lloegrian Houses and take ourselves south to their coast, and there, we will await the arrival of a vainglorious Roman fool and his doomed men. The war drums in the mountains and in the valleys are beating loud, and our druids are dancing wildly in their groves as the Khumry are going to war!” He boomed at them, and the raucous hammering of logs erupted once more, many wooden vessels being smashed in the celebration of these soaring spirits and the unstoppable outpouring of emotional synchronicity; beer, suds and pieces of wet timber flying everywhere.

Bellnor placed his hand on Lludd’s right shoulder amid this uproar and nodded in encouragement, both wisely giving pause for these demonstrations. The two kings embraced again, and both drank deep from their cups, their faces animated. Lludd turned back to the hall when some order had been restored, and he took another deep breath before continuing seriously. “Every man, woman and child will be bound to this great national llwgwaed we are forming for the first time ever in our history, and if the flashing, killing blades of Prydein join as one, we will offer this bold Caesar such a dread butchery, he nor any other Roman braggart will ever have the audacity to test the steel of *undeb* Prydein again! The world will know that the Prydeinig have come together and that we are ‘united’ at last. We, the mighty Brythons will merge to become one unbeatable army, and we will without question gain our

glorious victory over Rome and any other enemy, and we will endure unto the end of days; may the Gods allow!" He ended powerfully with this ubiquitous plea, and the great hall erupted with the bellowed response.

'May the Gods allow!' Pandemonium broke out then among them, and all hope of order was lost for some time as the conversations and discourses in this great hall were suddenly electrifying; their import and possible consequence now intimately understood by all present. The overall atmosphere between these once disparate tribes was finally one of accord, and experienced, wise heads which had at one time plotted tribal, internecine massacre were now bent in allied discussion about the most portentous possible events in all Prydein's long and ancient history.



Chapter Seven.

King Ederus was in a better mood now he was back in his capital CaerCamelon; his southeastern lowland stronghold founded on the broad plain of Fro Camelon. He had spent a pleasant day recuperating in his high private lodges, watching the ox-drawn carts rumble over the massive timber bridge far below. Loaded with goods, they rolled through the tollgates and further across the plain beyond to the trader's warehouses, adjacent to where those big herds of shaggy russet cattle were being driven. Up through the town the cattle processed ponderously, passing through the rows of tawny thatches, and then they were expertly herded by those stockmen and their dogs uphill to the long rows of post and rail stockades to the north. Although it was lambing time throughout Prydein and those hillside pens were filled with fluffy, black and white frolicking newborn, he enjoyed watching the lumbering of the great cattle the most. He also took a great deal of pleasure from watching the hurrying about of his hundreds of busy subjects in the streets below, as his ruling citadel had become the major cattle market in this whole region and wider Galedon. In fact, over a thousand of his subjects lived and worked in and around this fortress, their industry bringing much wealth into his vaults. He never tired of being involved in its commerce, even this vicariously and from such high remove, as Ederus had always felt a deep and abiding love for those long-horned cattle. Indulging himself, he watched them flow into the distant stockades, their bass lowing drifting up to these high battlements and this chamber on any windless day, to waft through these windows and delight him. His indulgence deepened as he cast his loving gaze over his own equally distant *royal* stockade, picking out his prize bull from his familiar outline among the herd. Ederus sighed with a deep sense of pride and accomplishment, as 'Terwyn' had become a procreation legend throughout Galedon. Fro Camelon's wide and low ford was situated

handily in a slower bend of the beautiful afon Carryn, which flows east through the verdant Nant Gwidan here, and it was laid out before and below him this morning like a glittering adder in the sunlight. Through these narrow openings in the northeastern tower and from the comforts of this luxurious day chamber, Ederus could see all the way down to the estuary of Linn Gwidan. Looking down to his right and through one of these draughty openings, he could see the huge bowl like harbour of that thriving seaport far below, and it too looked busy this day. Camelon's trefs, treflans, farms, crofts and its huge and prosperous harbour were all in sight of this high and exclusive viewpoint even on rainy days, and Ederus loved it here. Situated barely five miles from their closed southern border with Albion, this great capital caer is a place where Ederus always felt most comfortable, but never more so than when he was here in this very private bolt hole and with time to spare. Whilst he loved to tour and hunt his kingdom he was a hale and fit youngster no longer, and campaigning took its inevitable toll on both body and soul. He enjoyed his visits to Berwyn's Damnonia above all his hunting sojourns, but it was here at CaerCamelon; his *watch* fortress where he felt most in control. It was from here that Ederus had always been sure he could better feel the pulse of the ever-close old enemy. Ederus would also admit when pressed however that it was his burgeoning cattle market, now bathed in warm sunlight below that made him call CaerCamelon *home*, and the town was especially eye-catching this day too, dressed up as it was for the Imbolc festival. Through the busy streets of Tref Camelon far below, the long and brightly coloured rows of votive bunting and flags flapped ragged in a rising westerly, and the clouds were thinly stretched across a pretty mackerel sky by this speeding wind.

The king was back in his caer, as the frayed flag flapping at the highest tower confirmed, and the werrin of Camelon were pleased. These festivities marked the beginning of spring each year, and the druids had made the ancient declaration of Imbolc at midnight this morning as the teats of the ewes had begun to lactate and to drip this milky fluid of life. The sacred hawthorn too had thrust forth its miniscule, snowy spear

points all along both banks of the Carryn, also confirming this year's Imbolc. Galedon's druids had been content and proud to make their annual declaration, and Imbolc once declared by them began the lengthening of each day. From long history, this has been the day of Cailleach; the veiled *hag* Goddess, who should never be distracted on pain of being spellbound for a full year. It is she who draws in the clement weather so she can gather her firewood and retreat each year with the melting snows of winter, and Cailleach must be honoured but never disturbed from her toil. Every village and tref around the vale of Camelon and wider Galedon has a young girl dressed in black rags with a black veil drawn over her head and face for the rites and the celebrations required of the werrin this day. This mortal Cailleach would visit the thatches and enclosures of her neighbours, trading bundles of cut firewood for sweet treats and cakes, usually surrounded by all the excited children of her community. Today was no different, and Ederus watched entranced as the tiny figures of Camelon's 'black-pennant' gang came charging down the main street, each child clutching a cleft stick with a remnant of black cloth jammed in it. These they waved like flags, singing the ancient children's rhyme; *'Cailleach is in her forest cwt, her haggard face as black as soot! She's gathered in her firewood and turned away the rain, so all must offer thanks and food or spend the year in pain!'* Although Ederus could not hear those children singing, these ancient words were so familiar to him, he could hear them being sung in his mind as a little boy and by his mother. These cherished englyns are always sung to much applause and generous reward from each household, and a large and noisily excited phalanx of these local children, clutching their black pennants and looking like ants swept past the larger thatched houses of *stryd fawr* far below. They were preceded as ever by this year's pre-pubescent little hag in her veil and her black rags, and with her wicker basket of kindling clutched in the crook of her arm, she led a horde of eager children through the narrow streets of Tref Camelon below. Taking a last look down at the brightly decorated town bustling with his celebrating werrin, and the groups of excited children racing about its streets, Ederus swung the heavy timber

window gates with their archer slots closed and he locked them. Then he closed the finer, rosewood inner shutters against their padded leather gaskets and dropped the bronze latches. Throwing the heavy woollen curtain across this window opening, Ederus' mind returned to more pressing issues and the only personal matter still clouding his mood, and which even his cattle had failed to lift. He had summoned his wayward daughter Eirwen here, and he paced this large and private chamber in his lodgings now, determined to set the wilful girl straight.

Ederus had lost all track of time when there was a knock on the big oak door and which was opened without pause by Erran, who approached Ederus and bowed deeply before him. Ederus returned the bow for once.

"The Princess Eirwen is waiting in the *lle aros reiol* your majesty." The boy said formally.

"Show her in Erran." Ederus replied still deep in thought, and Erran bowed again before striding for the door. Moments later he returned and opened the door for the princess, who walked in with her head held high and an imperious look on her pretty young face.

"Sit." Ederus told her abruptly, pointing to an armchair by the fire.

His brusqueness seemed to sting, taking a little of the wind out of her sails, but Eirwen sat gracefully, folding her hands in her lap as she eyed him carefully. Ederus continued to wear the sheepskin rug out with his pacing for some moments, still clearly deep in thought, until he stopped before her with his hands clasped behind his back. His square, bearded chin jutted as he looked down at his daughter, and he was clearly furious with her.

"How could you daughter? How could you make secret liaisons with that arrogant puppy Cadwy ap Cridas; of Albion no less?" He challenged her bitterly. "How can you ignore centuries of ill feeling and the countless friends and family killed in battle by the Albion hordes? The Albionau are the *old enemy* as you well know daughter! How many generations of our people have been killed by the grisly wardogs of Albion?" He pressed her,

his voice rising. He turned away to compose himself as the names and faces of his own long honoured dead rushed him.

“How many men of Albion have we slaughtered over those same years father?” Eirwen responded quietly behind him.

Ederus turned to face her again, his brow crumpled and his eyes hard.

“Many here in Galedon still consider the people of Albion enemy despite these most recent months of peace!” He countered, becoming thoughtful and his eyes distant momentarily. Ederus was reminded of his own recent communication with Cridas and the possible alliance of necessity that may well be forged between them in the coming weeks. There was the impending arrival of a delegation of Brythonau Dde’s ambassadors in this regard, but Ederus was not willing to disclose this knowledge, as he had been waiting for an opportune moment to remind Eirwen that he had promised her hand in marriage to Prince Wrad of the Epidiau and the Lord of DunOlwen. Albeit this had been a long time ago when she was just a little girl, but the time was fast approaching for this milestone in her life and she needed to prepare for it.

“Will the killing just go on forever then father?” She asked him innocently.

Ederus turned on her, his colour rising, and his mind beset by gathering images of familiar and painfully missed Galedon warriors; irreplaceable men who had given their lives in service to him against Albion.

“Yes, very probably it will! Why should it not?” He challenged her hotly, clenching his sword fist without thought. Eirwen’s chin came up as if she was about to respond, but a subtle change in her watery eyes bespoke the one in her mind, and she just hung her head. “That is precisely why it is out of the question for you to associate any further with Cadwy ap Cridas, do I make myself clear?” Ederus commanded her angrily. “You cannot, as I promised your hand in marriage to the honourable Prince Wrad of the Epidiau as you well know and have known for years! You will perform a royal handfasting with him at the festival of *Alban Hefin*. When you will go to him at DunOlwen, and where you will perform *all* the duties expected of

you!" He commanded her artlessly and stridently, beginning to pace the sheepskin again. "The duties of a loyal wife, the Princess Regent of Galedon, and my daughter!" He roared at her, forgetting himself and regretting his harshness almost immediately. The most heart wrenching and forlorn look passed over his daughter's face at his words, and as they rebounded just as cruelly from these stone walls Ederus doubted himself briefly. He stood there with his fists clenched and his chin protruding regardless, wishing that he had softened his words perhaps or at least their delivery, but it was done now at least and she had been reminded of what had always been required of her. Eirwen bowed her lovely head and wept into her hands, and Ederus sighed, looking down at her in the armchair. His fists and his heart softened somewhat at that moment as she looked so young and so vulnerable, and he shook his head in consternation. Ederus realised perhaps for the first time just how unprepared he was to deal with a ferociously intelligent and headstrong girl, one on the very cusp of womanhood. He stood more upright as he regarded his daughter again, his eyes narrowing again however as the weight of his duties settled once more about his broad but tired shoulders.

"Pull yourself together girl! You have known all your life what one day would be expected of you, and you have known for years about your betrothal. It is the price you must pay for living such a privileged life." He qualified more evenly, but Eirwen was inconsolable, and her hot tears flowed as she gulped for air in the big armchair. Ederus moved to warm himself by the fire, giving her a little time to deal with her emotions and perhaps to come to terms with her responsibilities. The forlorn sobbing came to an end abruptly, which he considered a good sign. He turned to face his daughter again but instantly doubted his own judgement, as her face now bore a stark look he had not seen in eight long years. It was the determined, immovable face of Eirwen's mother, and Ederus' heart constricted at the sight and at the sharp dagger of memory which stabbed him. The grief came back so quickly it was like a hammer striking an anvil, and his love for his late Queen Siora flared brightly again for a fleeting

moment and as he saw her face once more in his daughter's, lit from that painful and lingering ember of devotion in his heart.

Although Ederus claimed direct descent from ArdFergus Fawr, he had been considered far from anywhere reasonably 'in line' to the ancient throne of Galedon when it was vacated at the death of the morbidly obese King Morleo. Ederus had only acceded the marble throne by marrying Princess Siora those eleven years ago, a formidable but gracious lady whose hêngorendaïd had been the memorable King Gethus. King Gethus Fawr had been the first highland monarch with enough real power to build a Galedonian alliance from the seven ancient territories once ruled by the seven sons of Cruithne the Cilician, and they were eponymously named Cait, Ce, Cirig, Fib, Fidach, Fotla and Fortrenn accordingly. Cruithne's somewhat mysterious father Cinge ap Luchtai was the aristocratic grandson of Partholóin himself, and that man's noble descendants came to rule all northern Prydein following his arrival, but it had been Partholóin's great-great-grandson; the imperious Cruithne and his seven impressive sons who had been the first to properly tame these wild northern highlands and their wildly disparate families. The inglorious, internecine *eilywed* in King Got's reign over six centuries previously known as pen-agr had ended that alliance, until Gethus Mawr had brought the tribes together again more than three desolate centuries later. Ederus had married his great-great-great-granddaughter Siora just a year before Morleo had died from his gluttony and when Ederus had then assumed the marble throne of the Galedonau to much historical ceremony and ancient rite. Ederus and Siora's reign had very quickly become something far deeper and more valuable than most arranged marriages however, and Ederus had counted himself fortunate indeed to have found all his needs and wants in one unequalled woman. The meddygs say that time heals all, but in his experienced opinion the pain of losing such a loved one never goes away. It is always right there, shiny and cruelly bright. Time may dull the gleam with the patina of rough years, but Ederus knew from withering experience that these pains which pierce our primal root remain, and they will until our last breath in this world. 'What would you

do Siora dearest?’ He asked her wordlessly, longing for her nearness at that lonely and forlorn moment and as he looked down at his weeping daughter. He felt that familiar, soul sucking ache he had almost forgotten, and it took his breath away once more, unlocking a rush of painful memories. Bereft still, Ederus was reminded that although theirs had been an arranged marriage, they had shared eighteen wonderful years of unsurpassed love together until sickness had taken his beloved Siora before her time. Those long, dark years of lonely grief following her death stretched out ragged behind him now, fluttering like a black and wind torn cape in a soulless void.

“I’ll never marry that boring old man tad! He’ll love himself and his horses far more than he will ever love me!” Eirwen blustered from the armchair by the fire, snapping Ederus’ focus back to the *now*.

He met his daughter’s gaze evenly, his temper now in check, but her eyes had hardened.

“I’ll kill myself first!” She blurted out, her hands clenched into fists, now in her lap, but her tears ran hot down her wet cheeks unabated once more.

Ederus’ frustration and the bite of his grief got the better of him at this immature and theatrical declaration, and he rounded on her again, his choler rising once more.

“Don’t be childish Eirwen and worse, you’re being hysterical! You know what is due, you have known it all your life! You have flounced around in your gowns, played with other people’s children and gone hunting and exploring whenever and wherever you pleased for long enough! It’s time to grow up daughter, and you will obey me! Now go to your rooms and consider well your responsibilities, not just to me but to your family and to Galedon!” Ederus commanded of her tactlessly and turned his back on her in dismissal, returning to the fire. Eirwen burst into fresh floods of tears behind him and ran from the room, a linen kerchief pressed hard to her mouth. He turned to watch her storm out, and those dangerous, blazing lights that flashed in her eyes were also so reminiscent of her mother’s.

‘Same temper too! She’ll come around. She’ll have to!’ He thought pragmatically to himself, ever the soldier. Ederus returned to his own chamber deep in troubled thought as far weightier matters needed his urgent attention.

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Eirwen had wiped the last, hot tears of frustration from her eyes, and her face now had a harder set to it. She was hopping mad, and dangerous imps of light danced in those beautiful eyes now as she packed the leather panniers with all the stuff she had hastily gathered about her. She had saddled and bridled Tringad her faithful stallion herself, and now she slid the large, contoured panniers over his rump and behind his saddle, stroking his flanks and talking quietly to him, as he knew well they were going out. Eirwen felt his excitement as she checked the straps were tight against his quivering ribs and made sure everything sat straight. Leading the big horse slowly out of the stable building and around to the shadows behind it, Eirwen pressed ahead in silence along this familiar route around the inside of the caer’s great towering walls, held deep in the rearing shadows that reached out from them. She led Tringad through a servant’s gate which leads to a wide track winding its way down the ramparts of this steep hillside, to pass through the ditches and to fall further to the smaller western gate and her favoured exit through those outer palisades. Rows of brightly coloured bunting and flags had been strung from these inner palisades, all the way down to the outer walls and to the gate far below, delineating the pathways between the ditches and flapping joyously in a stiffening breeze. That outer gate was guarded as were all the exterior gates of this fortress, and they too had been gaudily decorated for Imbolc. She knew all the guards however and they knew her well too, turning a blind eye to many late riding explorations through this huge gate. Every soldier in this fortress had fallen under her spell and Eirwen had become adroit in its use, fully prepared to wield her charms again this night. Pulling a spare horse blanket from under the saddlebags, she draped it over the big leather pouches as it helped to disguise them

somewhat. Eirwen did not care too much in the mood she was in, and she certainly was not planning on chatting long tonight. As she made her way downhill, a tall guard appeared in the bright doorway of the smoky and thatched shed that he sheltered in whilst on duty, waving to her as she approached. Eirwen struggled to suppress her smouldering anger, forcing herself to smile back, nodding in recognition.

“Good evening Master Ysberin, and Brigida’s blessings on you at Imbolc!” She offered pleasantly, adding the seasonal greeting and noticing the man’s delight at her remembering his name.

“Ah, I am still a lowly *rhingyll* your highness and no master yet!” Ysberin smiled back at her, stepping down from his guard hut and not glancing once at the extra baggage she carried. “Brigida’s blessing on you too my princess!” The guard bowed deeply to her. “No Bledri tonight my lady?” He asked on straightening, looking around for the huge hound, missing his usual wet and effusive greeting.

“No Ysberin. Sadly, he picked up a thorn in one of his pads yesterday and it got a bit sore and swollen, so I left him where he was today, on my bed!” She told him, rolling her eyes.

“This is late exercise my lady!” Sergeant Ysberin ventured, well within his authority and beginning to look Tringad over.

“Really?” Eirwen responded in all innocence. “How are your wife and your four children Ysberin?” She parried neatly with an expansive, utterly captivating smile, and the sergeant stood stock still in response, smiling back at her with his neck flushing pink.

“Oh, all growing steadily my lady! The missus outwards with our fifth and the four boys upwards!” He declared, losing interest in her horse and beaming up at her, clearly thrilled at being asked. Eirwen nudged Tringad into a forward step, galvanising the man into trotting over to the huge gate and unlocking it thoughtlessly, before swinging it open and allowing her to pass without further comment.

“Thank you Ysberin! Brigida’s blessings on you all, and my regards and congratulations to your good lady wife!” She gave Tringad another, stiffer nudge with both heels as she threw these felicitations over her shoulder to the guard, and the stallion launched himself toward the twinkling town ahead. Sergeant Ysberin’s response was lost in the ether as they galloped down the chariot ramp and headed into town.

They cantered away from Tref Camelon some minutes later, curving slowly westwards toward the hills. Tringad’s huge hooves threw up clods of earth behind them and Eirwen’s blazing hair flamed out behind her, glowing redly with the dying sun and reflecting her smouldering anger. Two hours later Eirwen was unpacking her horse panniers in a big cave she had found by accident three years previously, and it was clearly still unused. It looked as if it had lain undiscovered for decades when Eirwen had stumbled into the rubble strewn and overgrown entrance by pure accident three winters ago. A huge oak tree grew outside with its surrounding bastion of holly and hawthorn, and Eirwen had long ago hacked a circular clearing in that shrubbery, giving the cave a decent apron around its entrance, and it had offered an excellent corral for her horse with a little extra fencing work, using oak posts and cut lengths of hemp rope. It was a bit of a scramble to reach this enclosed entrance and it was far from easy to find, but Eirwen considered this cave her own now and had come to love the place, spending many hours here on her regular visits. Her mind spiralling into ancient, unknown places, Eirwen would lie on her back and stare at the paint spat handprints on the wall and the roof of this ancient cave alongside the stickmen hunters who had left them there, and the exotic and long vanished prey they had hunted from this ancient shelter gambolled wildly on these same rough walls. There were several celestial formations drawn on the roof too, and although slightly skewed, she recognised them all as the shapes and the stars she knew so well in the night sky. As Imbolc had just been declared by their druids, all in Prydain would look to the real stars this night, and as Brigida’s new day was about to begin across this great country of kingdoms, it was a very special moment in the calendar of all Brythons.

Sunset approached, and the heavenly stars lay poised unseen behind the last glimmers of smouldering, blood red daylight for this auspicious moment. They await Bel's passing, so that they may present themselves in glittering swathes for this long-awaited night of sacred celebration to *His* honour. The Sun God's last, fading rays of burnished sunlight glimmered on the western horizon as if the crown of those dark and silhouetted hills in the distance were aflame, and Eirwen stirred herself at this elemental splendour, getting herself organised. She had brought all the provisions she would need, and once she had filled Tringad's nosebag outside in the corral and got a decent fire going in this cave, she rolled out her blanket and gathered a spare mantle for her pillow. Her bed was soon made, and she settled down to stare up at the familiar paintings, nibbling an oatcake and with her mind soaring up to the stars depicted there. She missed the bulky, furry comfort of Bledri terribly, and her mind was fraught with her own outrageous and desperate situation, but the warmth and the exercise began to take effect and she was soon fast asleep.

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Ederus was awakened by Erran long past sunset and the start of this; Brigid's new day, and he had to drag himself from his warm, comfortable bed. The king of Galedon began dressing blearily in the clothes his squire had quickly gathered for him and as Erran broke the bad news breathlessly; 'Eirwen had been found to be missing from her chambers by one of the ladies of the night watch!' The highly respected gawres of the night watch patrolled the private quarters corridors of the young unmarried women in this caer throughout the hours of darkness, and an observant one had raised the alarm, causing pandemonium and the rushing about of a great many stewards and guards. No one knew how long the princess had been missing, as with all the festivities of Imbolc in full swing the fortress had been in uproar for days.

Although still blinking in the firelight, Ederus was now suitably dressed in riding clothes when there was a knock on his door. Erran moved quickly to open it.

“Nêr Olwydd Hîr your Majesty!” He announced, and Ederus nodded vigorously to his squire who quickly stepped aside.

The huge ghost-warrior strode into the room purposefully, towering over all, and he bowed deeply to the king.

“Her Highness’ horse is gone lord king and Bledri lays in her chamber with a swathed paw!” He said lugubriously without hesitation, and this knowledge instantly raised the already high levels of concern. “I have spoken to the master of the gate guards lord, and I await his response to my questions.” Olwydd said directly, and Ederus tried to absorb this information as he awoke fully.

“Erran, find her handmaiden and instruct her to go through her mistress’ cupboards to assess exactly what she has taken with her, if anything, and then report back to me here directly!” Ederus barked, waking up finally and Erran sprang to the door without response. “Damn it all! I should have known she would do something rash like this. Her mother was just as headstrong!” He grumbled to himself beginning to pace the room again, as he had found himself doing a great deal recently. “You don’t have a daughter do you Olwydd!” Ederus asked him, knowing well the answer.

“No lord. I have been blessed with two strapping boys!” Olwydd replied easily.

“Thank your lucky stars you never had one Olwydd, as dealing with them at this age is like trying to knit fog in the dark with gauntlets on!” Ederus retorted with an exasperated sigh. Another knock came on the door and Olwydd moved with an easy grace to open it.

“Ah Master Rhÿn, what have you discovered?” Olwydd questioned the squat and powerful looking man at the doorway.

“It is as we first thought Nêr Olwydd. Rhingyll Ysberin the sergeant of the western gate guards has confirmed her Royal Highness the Princess Eirwen left to go horse riding some hours ago through his gate, but whilst a little later than normal, the sun had not yet set, and the princess

frequently used that gate for these outings. This *is* a time of peace in Galedon and with all the vale thronged with people for the festival, it had not presented any real hazard to the sergeant sir. His duty cycle ended, and he was replaced, so he went to take part in the town fayre, not thinking of passing the information on to his relief. It was one of many such occasions, and the Princess Eirwen has always returned around sunset in the past. Ysberin feels badly about his omission Nêr Olwydd, and he leads over a hundred men who are now gathered at his gate, awaiting your orders as instructed.” The man finished breathlessly in his local accent, and Olwydd nodded, patting the man on his shoulder.

“Good work Master Rhÿn. My advice to you, is that you learn from this oversight, and make sure yourself that all your men comply, in that they must report all movements fully to their reliefs at the end of each shift regardless of this deceptive peace we are enjoying at the moment. It must be done as a matter of strict duty from this moment Master Rhÿn!” The huge nêr instructed this big man with a clear authority. “And you may send your men forth into the port, the tref and surrounding areas as her horse is well-known and easily recognised.” Olwydd instructed him in dismissal, and the man bowed before departing to his duties. Olwydd closed the heavy door and turned back into the chamber.

“I’m grateful for your assistance in this matter Olwydd, and as always, grateful for your wisdom and your company!” Ederus told him seriously from his position by the hearth, holding his hands behind him and warming them. Olwydd smiled ruefully and was about to reply when Erran re-entered with a wide-eyed and terrified Lydia in tow.

“This is Lydia your majesty, the Princess Eirwen’s handmaiden!” Erran introduced the girl, who stepped nervously into the room to stand dumb in such elevated company. She remembered then to bow deeply, and she blushed at the close call before standing straight once more.

“Come in. Come in girl, we won’t bite you! Well, I won’t anyway.” Ederus told her affably.

Lydia's eyes flicked upwards in fear and to the terrifying visage of the monstrous legend that towered over her with his petrifying, long-toothed cat screaming death at her from his broad column of neck. Those unnerving eyes caused their usual discomfort in all who were held fast in their dread gaze, and Lydia's legs began to tremble. She needed to urinate so badly at that moment, she was forced to squeeze her thighs together for both reasons.

"I jest with you Lydia and it is a poor jest." Ederus added with an apologetic smile, seeing the girl's disquiet. "Please be at your ease as Nêr Olwydd is my most trusted and valued agent, and be assured, he would lay his life down if needs be demanded in your protection, so fear him not Lydia as he is an ally and a close friend!" He added, looking carefully at the girl.

Lydia was clean, well dressed and she wore the flag of Brigida on her left breast as was proper this day. Slim though well proportioned, and although not beautiful to Ederus' eyes, he considered her fair pleasing to the eye. However, there was something else about her that pleased him, and he was not sure yet what, but he knew Eirwen spoke very highly of her and trusted her implicitly. There was a certain measure of toughness and a dogged, honest loyalty about the girl which showed on her open face, and Ederus regarded her favourably. "Well Lydia, pray tell us what my wayward daughter has taken with her on tonight's rash adventure!" He asked her gently, and Lydia without hesitation began to recite the list from memory in her charming, east-coast Bregedian accent.

Ederus and Olwydd eyed each other as the list went on, a measure of pride showing on Ederus' face at the rational, sensible number of items, weapons and equipment she had packed. This welcome knowledge was tempered however by recent intelligences from his scouts of several marauding bandits, who, drawn by the festivities of Imbolc were thought to be moving through the isolated area Eirwen normally went hunting and exploring. This was information which she would not have. It was this knowledge, and the fact she did not have the hound with her which had

elevated Eirwen's adventure into a possible crisis, and she needed to be found, quickly. Ederus had no reason to believe that she would go somewhere unknown to her and would no doubt head for the wide, rocky tract of land she had been accustomed to exploring, but not having Bledri with her was a real blow.

"I think Olwydd we are correct in assuming that she has headed for Cwm Creigiog, where unfortunately those brigands were spotted. As you know the land so well, I bid you track down my errant daughter and return her to me safely. More than this Olwydd Hîr, I name you *Noddwr Drwy Oes* to Eirwen! I charge you to be her protector and her champion until your life or hers is ended!" Ederus commanded his ghost-warrior with a serious, worried look, and then offered his hand. The ghost-warrior took the proffered hand with a look of surprise and sank to one knee, looking up at his king in earnest.

"This I will do, my Lord King Ederus. Lug bear witness! I swear this oath on my sword, my honour and my blood, that I will bring the Princess Eirwen home safely and protect her for all her life or I will die in the trying!" He swore this, his hard eyes glittering, and Olwydd kissed the golden stag ring of state to seal the oath. He stood then, and Ederus nodded to him before embracing him warmly.

"I have never believed anything so strongly in all my long life Nêr Olwydd!" The king told him with an unconcealed pride and conviction as they parted.

He watched with the same certainty as that broad and massive warrior strode for the door, a steely determination now in those pale and hard eyes.

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The following morning was Brigida's Day, and Eirwen awoke to *Her* pale dawn with the fire still smouldering in this familiar cave. Remembering her duty, Eirwen said her prayers on this propitious morning whilst gathering more split logs from a large pile at the back of this cave. She had cut

these on a previous visit, and they were now seasoned and dry. With some determined blowing she got the little fire going again, and she was glad of it as it was a cold Imbolc morning and the thick mist which hovered beyond the cave entrance was only just beginning to dissipate. As she checked Tringad under the oak outside and stripped the dew-soaked blanket from his broad back, spring was flourishing before her eyes and forcing its way through the crust of snow and ice beneath her feet. This iron hard winter still clung to the earth around this pristine and virtually unpopulated valley of Cwm Creigiog, but this was Brigida's Day, and it lifted her spirits immeasurably. Eirwen munched a few oatcakes as she rubbed the horse down with a stiff brush and before switching to the soft, humming a tune whilst waiting for the mist to disappear. She realised that she missed Bledri just as much this morning for his solid and noble companionship and his constant tomfoolery, and she gave out a forlorn sigh as she packed up her grooming kit and re-entered her cave.

With the beautifully tooled leather bracer strapped to her left forearm, Eirwen prepared her hunting bow, checking the dozen or so arrows in her deerskin quiver. Sitting cross-legged on the cave floor, she rolled each one in her fingers, casting her eye down the shaft of each arrow toward the light, judging the truth of each one. She examined the triple feather fletches and their silk bindings along with the probity of each flat, sharp and barbed steel head. Each perfect arrow had already passed her inspection and the scrutiny of the fletcher who had finished them, and they had also been matched for weight and length before being bundled together, but Eirwen needed to keep busy as her seething anger lay just below the surface still. Her glorious copper hair was tied back with a lace this morning, and she wore her favourite deerskin hunting hat over it, with its wide and floppy brim rolled up at the sides for archery and tied up over the crown now with a pair of leather thongs. Within the hour and with her breath billowing, she was stepping lightly through the cold and crackling undergrowth of this familiar woodland, her big green eyes flicking from one open space to the next. 'Arglwydd Cornonnyn, Horned-God of the green, Lord of the forest, I offer you my prayer and ask for your blessing

and your aid in my hunt today; for Arglwydd Brigida!’ She made the hunter’s plea in her mind, remembering today’s imperative addition. Looking around herself carefully and taking each light step deliberately and slowly, her concentration narrowed. She had considered a ride out, perhaps to spot some young deer or a boar in this broad and densely forested valley, but a kill shot from horseback was strictly for the experts. Eirwen did not relish sharing oats with Tringad for her dinner later and her camp rations elicited as much interest as the oat flakes, and so a more certain method of acquiring food was needed. Charging along on Tringad or hunting were the only two occupations which emptied her mind completely of the clamour of daily life. By necessity they demanded total focus and concentration, and she was well schooled in both arts. The beautiful bow she held easily was not the heavy and stiff yew war bow of the military archer, but one which had been made from hazel especially for her and by a master of the art, being the perfect draw weight and length for her once she had mastered it. Made in the ancient, curving form of the Khumry with the compressing, inner belly of the grip being the heartwood, this beautifully carved and painted bow was also balanced to perfection, and she had practised with it endlessly until it had really become hers. It was strung now from a matching pair of elaborate slotted silver finials, with an arrow knocked and held securely against the striped belly of the hazel with the practiced fingers of her left hand. A rustling sound came from the ground about twenty reeds to her left and she brought the bow up, gripping the notched tail of the hunting arrow tightly, and focussing her sight down the perfect line of the arrow shaft. She still had not quite mastered the *real* art of shooting an arrow as done by the best archers from Khumry and Seganta, where after a lifetime of practice those broad and well-muscled men can stare at the target and loose, knowing the arrow will fly true. Eirwen still had to look down the arrow to aim, fighting to control her breathing and her hammering heart to keep it steady and on target but she was improving daily. The rustling came again, and a big fat rabbit hopped across the snowy footpath ahead of her roughly forty feet away. Eirwen drew and loosed in one fluid motion

almost without thought, and the arrow flew true, piercing the rabbit's neck and killing it instantly. Eirwen was surprised at her own skill as she ran to the kill and looked down at the dead rabbit, then to the earth below its furry carcass and deeper, to the Underworld below that.

"Arglwydd Cornonnyn, Horned-God of the green, Lord of the forest, I give thanks for your aid in taking the life of this rabbit, so it can nourish mine!" She sent the ancient, obligatory post-hunt prayer to the hunting God aloud. Bending to pick up the warm, fur bundle, Eirwen held it high, her green eyes glittering as she made her offering. "To you great Brigida; Goddess of rebirth, spirit of regeneration and our healing divinity. I worship and honour you!" Eirwen growled the consecrated triad, her emotions constricting her throat. Lowering the small and warm, furry carcass, she stared at it for a long moment before carefully withdrawing the arrow and putting it to one side. Then Eirwen squeezed the dead animal's bladder from long habit, emptying it with a hot squirt of rank smelling urine to the snow. She then drew her skinning knife from the curving scabbard at her hip and expertly gutted the rabbit just off the pathway, knowing a fox or some other carrion eating carnivore would find the gift in no time.

Eirwen was soon back in her cave and had easily skinned the carcass, putting the big wet pelt to one side as she stoked up the fire again. Two split-ended forks of green alder supported another living branch of the same, which had been pushed through the rabbit's tough body. It now roasted nicely, the dripping fat sizzling pleasingly in the flames, and she turned it regularly, her mouthwatering from the delicious, savoury aroma that now filled this painted cave. Once she had finished eating the rabbit, its bones littered the sandy floor of this cave, making her think of Bledri again and aching for his silent, comforting presence. She used a little fingernail to dislodge a piece of meat from between two teeth, before taking a small clay bottle with a cork stopper from a saddlebag. She pulled the cork with her teeth and took a swig of the *wirod-mywyd* it contained, grimacing as the fiery, honeyed liquor burned her throat.

“Brigida, Brigida, Brigida! I honour you and I worship you!” Eirwen held up the small bottle and offered her respects to the Goddess again with a toast, as it was surely *Her* rabbit she had just eaten.

Taking another big swig of this ‘spirit of life’, she swallowed this one more easily before stoppering the bottle and returning it to its satchel. Eirwen’s hand froze in that moment, and she turned her head toward the opening as she had heard Tringad whinny outside. This was followed by the unmistakeable sounds of breaking branches as if something big was pushing hard through the undergrowth circling his corral. It could not be any of the familiar wild creatures of these rocky hills, as these timid animals did not crash through bushes in that way, not unless it was a lynx or a bear. Her pulse quickened at that alarming thought, but she knew these dangerous predators had not been seen in these lowlands for decades. Eirwen’s nerves jangled, and her heart began to thump in her chest nonetheless at the thought of confronting a fully grown she bear, looking for a new home perhaps for her young cubs. Her breathing became shallow as she tried to place the noises outside, but which had abruptly stopped. Tringad had become silent again, which was even more worrying and confusing as he would be screaming if a bear or a mountain cat had entered his circle. Another sound came from outside her cave now but much closer this time, and the blessed juice of action began to course wildly through her veins. Eirwen watched in horror as a big, strange man pushed his way through the dense bushes at this cave’s entrance, and their eyes met. The smell of the roasting meat had clearly allowed him to find the hidden entrance to this ancient cave and Eirwen cursed her luck. Two more big and dangerous looking men followed him in, both grinning broadly as they took the scene in before them in a flash. Eirwen was confronted by three scruffy and filthy looking rogues who had suddenly trapped her in this cave. Her blood turned to ice-water as this deadly situation crashed into her senses, her bowels turning to hot liquid in a heartbeat. The consequences of her rash actions presented themselves now and in the form of these three, atavistic looking brigands who plainly could not believe their good fortune. ‘Of all the times to be without my

Bledri and this happens!’ She thought morosely, her heart sinking and her face paling. Eirwen missed his unequalled guardianship in that horrifying blink of time more than she ever had, as that huge hound could have made all the difference here and at this fateful moment. On his own Bledri could have driven these ruffians from this cave, and with a few well-placed arrows swiftly following she could have held her cave indefinitely, but she was alone. Her eyes flashed to her silver-tipped bow then and the fawn, beautifully tooled deerskin quiver of arrows beside it, but the first man in followed her glance and laughed.

“I wish you would try missy; I really do!” He slobbered in a thick western brogue and through a tangled, unkempt and greasy beard. Three teeth were alone in his ugly head, two up and one down. These were lopsided brown stumps, around which saliva dribbled over the wide expanse of his wet and pink gums, making Eirwen feel like vomiting with fear and loathing. She crabbed backwards slowly, still crouching as the man picked up her bags, upturning each one so that all her belongings fell to the floor.

“Leave my things alone, you ugly pig!” She shouted at him, and all three began laughing as they moved into the cave and began rummaging through her personal stuff, blocking any flight to exit. Eirwen’s simmering anger broke at this rough treatment of her kit, and she stepped up to the first man boldly. “I said leave my possessions alone! Do you know who I...” The heavy, backhanded slap caught her completely off guard to her own amazement, and she sprawled backwards to the floor, her face burning and the brute’s cohorts laughing even more.

“Let’s cnuch her and then kill her, slowly!” The second man drawled like a village idiot, his vacuous, narrow eyed face cruel and without a shred of intelligence.

Eirwen quailed, feeling the blood fall from her face, as it now became crystal clear what was about to happen to her. ‘Brigida protect me!’ She prayed as her legs began to tremble. These villains began to move ominously toward her, the first halfwit unbuckling the leather belt that constrained his huge beer belly in preparation. Something happened then

inside Eirwen, and it was like the breaking of a twig. One moment she was trembling like a newborn lamb, fighting a ballooning panic and waves of mortal terror, and the next she was suddenly cold and focused with no trembling signs of her rising fear. Her anger had suddenly flared, hot like lightning in a building storm; bright, fierce and uncontrollable. She snatched the dagger from behind her back and sprang at the first man like an enraged highland lioness. With his left hand clutching his unfastened bracs, Eirwen easily ducked under the unwieldy right fist he threw at her head. Exactly as she had been trained to do, she came up fast from the crouch and stabbed upwards into his chest, feeling the blade slide fortuitously between two ribs. Knowing she would have to be as quick as a stoat, she whipped the knife away as the man screamed and fell to the ground, clutching his wound and trying to staunch the bleeding. Eirwen turned toward the second man to repeat the lightning attack, and *'bang!'* She was punched in the face, and her dagger flew from numb fingers. Falling stunned to the floor, blood poured from her nose and a rushing sound roared in her ears. Struggling to remain conscious on this dirt floor with her face smarting and her nose numb, she watched through her swimming vision as those two strangers tried to help their stricken friend. Bright blood was pouring from the man's mouth now as well as the chest wound, which sucked loudly and wetly with each agonised breath, and he gave out a great final convulsion and died, spewing a huge gout of thick blood which fountained from his gaping mouth.

"Tha's moi brudder!" The second halfwit wailed. "You kill't him, you cnuching bitch!" He screamed, picking up her bloodied dagger and advancing on her, clearly incensed and bent on murder. The other one, the biggest man held him back, enveloping him in two huge arms and lifting him off the floor.

"Calm down Beagan!" He yelled in his ear, holding him tight in the enormous bearhug. "When did you ever cnuch such a beautiful girl, never mind see, eh?" He asked his enraged comrade. "A noble too? No, let us do what we set out to do and rape the bitch first, then we'll kill her nice and

easy over this fire of hers.” He said maliciously, and the younger man and the brother of the deceased relaxed and began to nod. Beagan was put down and he stayed there, but his eyes were locked onto Eirwen’s with the most murderous and vengeful look twisting his pinched face which turned her bowels to a loose, liquid heat once more.

“Ay, you better have your go first Dev, as there won’t be much left of this bitch to roast by the time I’m through with her!” He snarled, and so that his words carried their full meaning. His blazing eyes gave a terrifying assurance to this deadly promise, and they did not leave Eirwen’s for a moment, causing the trembling in her legs to resume.

Suddenly the big man moved deceptively quickly and he leaned down to grab her by the hair, forcing her to stand, and then he punched her again on the side of her jaw. Eirwen did not feel herself fall or thud to the hard floor this time, she just floated away in a dazzling nova of light. She almost passed clean out on this cave floor, but although stunned, this explosion of blinding light began to fade and part of her still clung to consciousness as she sprawled on the dirt. Still attentive to what was going on and aware of the hard earth beneath her, Eirwen could feel someone tugging at her and at her clothes, but she was strangely passed caring as little dancing lights were bouncing around in her head. As these bright motes finally began to wink out into darkness, she felt as though she was falling backwards into a deep, black chasm. Eirwen felt a crushing weight on her abdomen at that horrible and fading moment, drawing her back a little from the depths so that she just clung to consciousness. The fat one had obviously sat astride her, pinning her arms to the floor and he was laughing down at her.

“You’re going to love what I’ve got here for you missy.” He breathed, and Eirwen could smell her whisky on his foul breath and discern the lust that gravelled his voice. It brought her back even more, firing her temper once more.

Eirwen felt a little strength flow back into her from her building anger and as her head began to clear. She began to struggle again, fighting back

once more against the horrendous weight of this disgusting, odious man. Her vision was improving somewhat, and her woolly head was clearing, but oh so slowly. Shocking, iron hard hands then crushed her breasts, making her cry out in her pain and her loathing. Overwhelming disgust welled up inside her then, as for some unknown reason this foul creature had spat a great mouthful of hot and sweaty saliva into her face. Then he fell on her.

Eirwen was appalled by this face full of hot and salty slobber which had blinded her. Some of the slime had even got in her mouth, and she blindly spat the filth out, trying not to vomit with the revulsion. The colossal dead weight of this repulsive man which had crushed the wind out of her felt almost immovable, but she valiantly struggled against it, still spitting his filth from her mouth and fighting the urge to vomit. She wrestled with him for long moments before realising with a sudden, cold shock that he really was dead. It was not spittle that had wet her face, but the man's hot blood. The intolerable weight of him vanished then, just as suddenly as it had fallen on her, and this bleeding corpse with its gaping throat was yanked off her and discarded like a broken doll. It was thrown into a corner of this cave with ease and by the towering figure of one Nêr Olwydd Hîr. The relief she felt at seeing his craggy warface and his screaming blue cat through the blood and the tears was immense and completely overwhelming, making her feel far more lightheaded than the mortal danger ever had. This familiar giant smiled down at her, terrifying and wonderful all at once and he offered her his enormous hand. Eirwen took it in stunned amazement, and the huge ghost-warrior restored her to her feet, whereupon she rushed into his arms.

"Oh my Gods Olwydd! I have never been so pleased to see anyone in all my life!" She cried, sobbing through her tears and clinging tightly to him. Olwydd was both surprised and pleased at this demonstration, his deep and paternal feelings for his revered and beloved princess swelling along with his pride as she shuddered in his embrace.

"Think nothing of it your royal highness." Olwydd demurred, putting both muscular arms around her. "I will always be your protector, and as of this morning I am sworn by blood-oath to be your *Noddwr Drwy Oes*, and I will protect you for as long as I am able my brave, honourable princess." He told her gruffly, lifting her face and wiping away the blood, inspecting the damage to her nose and glad it had not been broken. Glancing to the dead brigand at his feet, he looked back at her with a wintry smile, inclining his head. "Did you kill that one?" He asked her with his eyebrows arched, and she nodded, her eyes full of tears. Her nose and face were still smeared with her attacker's and her own blood, but her face hardened at his question, and her eyes blazed.

"I did, with Brigida's help!" She admitted with a proud sniff, seeing the other's throat had been cut and that he had joined his brother in the Underworld. "The slovenly bastard thought raping me would come easy!" She spat, looking down to the corpse at her feet with a snarl. He stared sightlessly back up at his killer from the floor of this cave with glazed and dead eyes above a tangled and blood clotted beard, and Olwydd began to laugh.

A few minutes later, Olwydd released a pair of pigeons from a reed cage on his horse and returned to the cave to help his princess repack and assemble her luggage, glad her beloved horse was unharmed. A little after noon, they were headed back to the caer at an easy walking pace for their horses, and they began to talk to each other, unfettered by the usual harness of courteousness and ancient royal protocol for the first time, and as friends.

"Why?" Was Olwydd's obvious first question, and so Eirwen opened up to the fearsome warrior, telling him all about Cadwy of Albion and her feelings, hopes and dreams in his regard. She told him her crushing news, of her long-arranged marriage to Prince Wrad which she had forgotten all about, and all her worst fears. As Bel turned to blood in the west, they finally approached the flat plain of familiar land that lay in a fine sweeping bend of the afon Carryn, and with the distant, misty hill of CaerCamelon

rising in the distance, she was home. Time had flown, and in that edifying time Eirwen and her *noddwr* had become firm friends, but she was at once nervous again now, knowing what she was about to face, however, Olwydd's presence seemed to bolster her confidence. Now she had unburdened herself to this ghost-warrior, the prospect of her father's wrath and all his questions and anger did not seem quite so bad. Olwydd had promised her that he would take a message to Cadwy and explain her situation to him personally, with her impassioned plea to make sure that he understood she had been forced into the situation that she was now struggling to come to terms with. With the ghost-warrior's assurances bolstering her, Eirwen steeled herself to face the music as dark riders approached to meet them in this lowering dusk.

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With her lower-throne empty beside him in this great hall and his errant daughter safe but under watch elsewhere in his caer, Ederus could relax a little more. He had been considering this last hour how best he was going to deal with her, and he drained the big horn of warm, honeyed mead now with a soft, appreciative belch. He nodded to Erran, who came swiftly to the dais, bowed and refilled the horn. Sipping the glorious *medd melys*, the king looked around the smoky interior of his still gaudily decorated great hall, and at the assembled gŵyr and warlords from across Galedon who joined the groups in deep discussion between these benches as they arrived. Ederus finally put Eirwen from his mind as there were far more important matters to hand. The hour had arrived for their great war council now the imperative Imbolc festival had ended, and every prince, gŵyr, tumon, nêr, glyw and penaig in Galedon had all been notified of the great *cymgad* here at CaerCamelon. In fact, anyone who commanded men in the territory knew of this great meeting and were represented here at this same powerful gathering by somebody.

Ederus stepped down from his marble throne as three more, powerful leaders he knew well and respected entered his hall, and all three big, hard looking warriors bowed to him. Ederus nodded his head in respect

and recognition before signalling one of the many *menestr* in the room, and a young cupbearer approached these new visitors with a smile. He held out a stack of cow horn drinking vessels and filled them with the finest warm and sweet mead from a wooden ladle. The old bard's rhyme of 'medd melys' floated back to Ederus' mind as he watched; *'First horn is for thirst, the second is for pleasure. Three horns for song and the fourth is for leisure. Five horns for folly, the sixth is for slumber, but the seventh horn reveals the dark druid's number.'* This ancient englyn caused a smile at the long-forgotten words, and he watched his young indentured *menestr* pour the steaming honeyed mead with the voice of an infant Eirwen singing them in the memory of his mind. Two more arrivals came through his arched oak door then, these from the Tawescally lands of King Conal of DunAer. This pair of seasoned warriors had come west from the *Mynyddoedd Goch*; a mountainous region protecting the wild, storm-tossed eastern coast of Galedon. One was a renowned gŵyr and the other his *penaig* or tribal leader, and she had the sharp and restless eyes of the practiced killer. This well built, impressive female warrior's face was heavily tattooed, and she looked fiercer than the gŵyr she followed, as did the other female warriors present; a common thing in Prydain. In his heart Ederus had known Conal would not come, despite his own recent private communication and an honest offer of a renewed friendship between them. In founding his great federation Ederus had demanded compromise from all the tribes, but the most challenging aspect had been curtailing their cross-border cattle raiding and putting an end once and for all to the many age-old grievances and land claims between them, the root of most no living person could remember anyway. Some tribes had to compromise more than others, and Conal had thought his Tawescally one of those, being badly treated by Ederus when he had allowed King Rianaw ap Beli Mawr to take and to rule 'throne vacant' Wenyllon to Conal's south following the death of Rianaw's legendary father. In doing this, he had denied King Conal the long-coveted CaerMelyn and its vast acres of surrounding crop fields, regardless of his claimed ancient rights to the lands should Wenyllon's throne ever fail. The throne had fallen empty

when Wenyllon's ancient bloodline had ended tragically, and by being spilled in its entirety with the death of old King Pîr and all three of his sons in a defensive battle against marauding scots. Conal, a *vassa*/king could not hope to challenge King Rianaw's might or the far-reaching dominion of his all-powerful family. Although supported by his tribal history, Conal was not able to substantiate his claim on Wenyllon to Ederus and his druid council's satisfaction either and so his claim had been denied. His rancour stemmed from his belief that Ederus had bowed to political pressure to allow the son of the late Beli Mawr to rule Wenyllon, denying Conal's rightful and legal petition. Conal chose to ignore the weight of undeniable supporting proof of Rianaw's claim and his unimpeachable lineage, retreating behind his high palisades to ruminate sourly on his disappointment and the loss of more than his honour and his pride. Resentment and the perceived sting of injustice had by all accounts strengthened Conal's belief in his own claim to Wenyllon, and he had spent those seven years either in seclusion or scouring Tawescally for further evidence in support of his suit. This had inevitably driven a wedge between him and Ederus, but Conal was far from stupid and the Tawescally monarch had the sense to carry out all his vassal duties to the minimum requirement, although always with an unconcealed measure of resentment. In those same seven years and in total contrast, Rianaw's Wenyllon had become a model vassal state. Conal's bitterness was no secret, and although he always did his duty to the federation, he had become a stranger to Ederus. Moreover, Rianaw had killed Conal's older brother and heir to the Tawescally throne; Crown Prince Cynan four years ago and in the famed bout of mortal 'royal' *sarhaed*. That infamous swordfight had caused Rianaw's own eventual death from wound sickness, deepening the enmity between Tawescally and Wenyllon further. Soon after this, Rianaw's son Lleu had killed Conal's leading gŵyr and sword master, the fool who had publicly and drunkenly insulted his wife, and which event had sparked a minor rebellion. This in turn had galvanised the four indefectible *Red Dragons of Prydain* into their 'Blazing to Galedon', where they orchestrated a legendary chronicle, one equal in

glory to anything their predecessors had accomplished. The repercussions of that military *sojourn* by the sons of Beli Mawr still reverberate around the eastern kingdoms of Galedon to this day, and their bards still sing of when the incomparable red dragons of Prydein stormed north in their blazing fury. In view of this upcoming alliance, Ederus thought it high time they put their differences aside and he had hoped Conal would have personally accepted his invitation, but he was not surprised when he did not. Both these vassal Tawescally leaders who were here in his stead bowed to him and raised their horns in salute nonetheless, and Ederus returned the gesture with a nod, keeping his expression neutral. Looking around now at the rows of benched tables below him, some of which the stewards had brought out from storage for such large gatherings he became thoughtful. Regarding how they now filled the normally empty spaces in this hall, Ederus scratched his beard absently. They had been set out in the traditional way in rows, and all were facing the back of this hall and the elevated dais he stood on, but he frowned. His neat mind saw a weakness in this tradition, and with the significance of tonight's essential war council, Ederus thought he could improve the worth and the process of this great crychiad with an alternative layout. He called Erran over to him again from where he stood in a corner and who's eyes always followed his king, and the earnest young arwein ran over, his face lit with pleasure. Ederus took great pride in the lad as he was as honest and as true as the day is long, and not just infused with the boundless energy of youth, but had, through his own quick mind and self-motivation made himself invaluable. Ederus smiled at him now as he bowed deeply and formally to him with his round face, his curly brown hair and his adoring doe eyes. Ederus honoured him with an equally deep and respectful bow, and Erran's face flushed with surprised pleasure. His eyes shone as they met Ederus' and the king could not help but smile in return.

"Fetch a dozen strong stewards Erran, we're going to have a little change around in here." He instructed him plainly, and without any doubt or question Erran ran to his duties.

Ederus moved to stand beside the legendary marble throne on this dais. It had been the state seat of ArdFergus Fawr; first *pendragon* and the first high king to establish an allied greater Galedon. Resting his hand on the pale, cold and blood-streaked stone, Ederus' thoughts drifted back to the real high kings of old in those long passed and wildest of days before the federation. Before unity had been wrested from perennially competing warlords, back in the truly feral days of those independent northern territories, the rulers of each tribe were known as *dracons*, the name coming from drac; an ancient dialect word for a leader coming straight from their Phoenician past. Long ago, Cruithne's seven impressive sons; Cait, Ce, Cirig, Fib, Fidach, Fotla and Fortrenn had been the first dracons of these high and mountainous territories, and Partholóin's noble descendants were the first warlords with enough strength and enough bri to properly tame these wild northern highlands. Time had softened the old title to dragon, and yet still, the chief of these clan leaders once druid nominated as a *pendragon* can be elevated to the out and out dictator of all these islands in times of crisis, and not just here in the north. An '*Uther*' Pendragon denoted a nominated dictator who had proved himself victorious in his battle, the equally ancient Sidonian word meaning *terrible* or *awesome*. Those all-powerful, *real* uther pendragons had ruled their widely spread territories and this one with unquestionable strength, although tempered by their incredible intelligence and their huge characters. However, their kingdoms and their trading centres around this world had not been gifted or inherited, far from it, they had been acquired with an ambition and a cleverness that spoke of their wealth in so much more than metal, as they possessed crucial knowledge in a host of services and industries all acquired from global trading, and Partholóin, the first of these elite giants of leaders to come to Prydein had led that field. Arriving almost three millennia ago from Cilicia, a city port and the sun worshipping capital of their continental territories, his people were seeking Bel's earthly residence when they came to these lands so long ago; their great God and the Brythons procreator. Ederus and all Galedon's aristocracy was aware of the carved stone standing on the

border between Fachomagia and Tawescally, as this ancient stone of dedication retold this ancient tale of when those ancient Phoenician travellers had come here looking for their sun god Bel. ArdFergus *Fawr*, that great and first man's descendant had been the first high king to possess enough power to bring all these disparate tribes and families of northernmost Prydein together into some sort of loose alliance since the death of Partholóin. Since Fergus Fawr's death those many centuries passed, many kings from his bloodline across these dissimilar territories and throughout Galedon's history have attempted the same, but none succeeded until Ederus' great, great, great grandfather-in-law High King Gethus Fawr ascended the marble throne. *Fawr* had been the familiar name by which those old pendragons had been called, but the title these days was a mere shadow of its earlier import in Ederus' opinion. Although he was high king of Galedon and called *fawr* by friends and family, Ederus had not been granted the title of *pendragon* by the druidry, nor would he. He held no expectation in this regard, as although he and all his subjects still venerated the title, it was thought virtually unobtainable since the passing of perhaps the greatest of them all. Ederus was not alone in his esteem of those who came before him, and who, through their own tireless efforts had gained that ancient title, and especially that of the *Uther* Pendragons Cirig, Fidach, Floclaid, Got, Ce, Fibaid, Gethus, Fergus, Leir, Marganus, Dyfnarth, Manogan and Beli. The southern braggart King Caswallawn *Fawr*, as he now insisted on being called sprang to Ederus' mind then; he who had claimed this high kingship of his own. This now, mostly denigrated title claimed by the king of the Casufels was only accepted as high kingship of the Southern Brythons by the rest of Prydein. Although Ederus was certain of that avaricious man's longer-term ambitions, Caswallawn had not yet managed to wrest control of all the old territory of Lloegr, but he was infamously persistent by all reports. *Fawr* meant nothing more than 'big' to Ederus these days, a title with not even the vaguest hint of its historic significance, and if Caswallawn wanted to be called *big* that was his right, as in Ederus' opinion a man could be a big fool and a big king at the same time. Had that ambitious Casufelawny

monarch adopted the title of *pendragon* without it being bestowed, his impudence would have galvanised the northern kingdoms into violent protest, and the proposed journey south would be for entirely a different reason. Even adopting the temporary title of pendragon of Lloegr would have caused uproar, as this 'field-marshal' position had also always been selected by the royal and druidic councils to lead a war between nations or federations, but Caswallawn was anything but stupid. King Caswallawn was known to possess equally overflowing measures of egotism and natural cunning, traits which have always served the ambitious and ruthless politician. That Brythonic king was famously pitiless and self-motivated, his veins being filled with the atavistic fire blood of his great father and those legendary Khumric dracons who had come before him. There was a good chance of him meeting the power-hungry king of the *Brythonau Dde* before long, and Ederus looked forward to getting a personal measure of another of the infamous sons of great Beli Mawr himself. Beli Mawr had been a *real* high king in Ederus' opinion, and that great man was the last in that monumental line. He had been the most fearsome *uther pendragon* in the old tradition, and Ederus revered that late and much-lamented Khumric warrior-king above all others. Only seven years since his passing, Beli Mawr was a golden, rousing example of the ultimate Brythonic warlord, and one who Ederus doubted would ever be equalled. He held the great man, whom he had even met on several enlightening occasions as a talisman and a lifelong inspiration. It was no surprise to Ederus that Beli Mawr's noble issue had come to hold such positions of power and influence across Prydain, even here in high Galedon.

Ederus' train of melancholic thought was broken as Erran led a line of burly stewards into the hall. Quickly refocusing his thoughts, he called his loyal arwein over and spoke quietly to him, clearly outlining his wishes before turning to face his assembled gŵyrd and raising his arms. "Ladies and Gentlemen please!" Ederus called out in his deep baritone, and all eyes turned to the huge king on the dais standing by his throne. "Firstly, Brigida's blessings on you all!" He offered with a smile, one hand resting

on the cool marble and nodding in recognition as his entreaty was returned by all. "Please stand aside and allow these stewards to move the tables and benches around, as I think we can improve the arrangements for tonight's vital crychiad!"

The stewards swung into action at this declaration, clearing a large space around the huge central hearth and making one big circle of benches around it. Many seasoned old gŵyr looked on in amazement at this change in tradition, and some frowned, not yet seeing the benefit of such an upheaval. Once all was in place and set out to Ederus' satisfaction, he waved them all to sit where they pleased on the great circle of benching. It took a few moments for them to realise that position and reputation meant nothing suddenly, as there was no throne, no '*parth y brenin*', no strictly reserved *front benches*, and even their king would sit with and alongside the rest of them. A few confused and concerned looks were exchanged but not one person objected, and after some self-conscious shuffling all were eventually seated, although Ederus had a great deal more elbow room than most on this huge circle of benches, which touched both side walls of this great hall it was so broad.

The king of Galedon looked over the low flames of his generous hearth, through the smoke and at this huge circle of over fifty seasoned and grisly looking warriors sitting around his fire. They stared back at him over the low flames with their bearded and thickly moustached faces wrathful in the red glow. The handful of hard, feminine faces among them were serious too with question, and he gave them all a wolfish smile.

"My honourable and valiant Gŵyrd of Galedon, this crychiad concerns what may well turn out to be one of Prydein's greatest threats in all its long and honourable history." Ederus began sombrely. "So, I have had us seated 'in the round' so to speak, so that we all have equal right to voice opinion, and so none will feel pushed to the margin as tradition sometimes demands." Ederus explained the alternative layout, and many greying heads nodded at his sagacity surprisingly. "A large delegation of southern ambassadors is travelling north as we speak and will arrive at

CaerCamelon roughly three days hence, the Gods willing.” He told them, looking to his left and right. “This august body of senior Brythons is led by the renowned orator and diplomat Lord Androgeus of the honourable ‘Order of Llysgennau’, and he has been authorised to propose this great Brythonic alliance to our three northern nations.” Ederus shared this intelligence known to most present. “The red and silver machine of Caesar is given no pause, and this treacherous, duplicitous Roman wolf slays all who resist him, from German to Galliad and all who stand in the way of his political successes, as his greed for wealth is clearly paramount.” Ederus added this with a cynical snarl, and these people around him grumbled their shared loathing. “I need accurate and current reports of our readiness from all my Houses, and we must decide who we will call on should this historic alliance take place. Just as vitally, we must decide who we leave behind and what measures we must take to secure our lands in our absence!” He added gravely, and his circular audience were now completely involved, and all were nodding now in agreement. “Should I decide to agree to the demands of the priesthood and form this first ever, temporary alliance between our three northern nations, we must be ready to declare our strength and numbers committed to the endeavour. And of course, we must choose our pencad who will command the host!” Ederus grinned like a wolf again here, as he saw there was a bit of fidgeting at the prospect of this often-problematic selection. Although Ederus would always possess overall control, all his gŵyr thought they were up to the job of *military commander* and the leader who would issue his orders to the other staff officers. ‘If they didn’t think they were good enough, they probably wouldn’t be here tonight’, Ederus considered with amusement before continuing.

“We will stay here all night and all the next day if required.” He told them, regaining the immediate attention of all, and he grinned with more humour through his beard at a few of their concerned faces. “Don’t worry my loyal subjects, there will be mead left aplenty and your wives and husbands will still be warming your bracken when you return to your thatches!” He chuckled, breaking what tension remained in his hall, and

this great circle of warriors laughed, elbowing each other with lewd winks and gestures. Ederus looked around himself now at all the cygils of his tribes, hanging on these walls and arrayed on the breasts of these seasoned warriors circled around him, united in *federation* and in their service to him, and he was pleased at his last-minute decision to circle these benches.

‘Perhaps I should have a big circular table made for CaerCamelon, formed like a huge round shield. I could have all our cygils painted around the rim, and we could all sit around it then as equals for our discussions?’ He proposed this absently and silently to himself as he looked around at these glowering wardogs of his, and then Ederus chuckled again at his own foolishness. ‘Ridiculous!’ He smiled inwardly, looking back to this animated circle of warriors through the smoke.

“Right then, let’s have these reports!” He demanded seriously of them, and several gŵyr leaned forward to speak.

* * * * *

The great council and all their very serious declarations had ended hours ago and the caer was quieter now, with just the odd servant or maid crossing the courtyard far below. As was her custom when life became difficult or confusing, Eirwen would come here to sit on a wool-stuffed leather cushion she would bring with her and place on the great timber buttress which protruded from the wall of this high eastern quarter tower. She pulled the deep, fleece lined hood of her cloak up and over her head, as although it was almost summer, the gale that sliced across these tall battlements was cold still and swept down from the frigid vastness of the high north untamed. It nibbled at her ears, but she revelled in it as it scoured her senses into more orderly furrows, and the thrumming of the ragged banner above her head was like music to her ears. It was not just the stunning views across Fro Camelon, Linn Gwidan and their surrounding majesty, it was the feeling of freedom which had brought her back here over the years, like a dove to its cote. This dependable but icy northern blast, here at her most secluded and secret spot had always

seemed to strip away the meaningless and confirm the significant in her tumbling thoughts, but this freezing wind provided no such helpful analysis today. The naïve, sticklike carving of the king stag of Galedon she had gouged into the timbers of this massive buttress with her dagger so long ago remained. It made her smile now as she fingered the rough outline absently with a little sadness, thinking back to a much simpler time when she had not a care in this world and no comprehension of the responsibility, nor the depth of feelings coming-of-age would summon within her. Confined to a much quieter caer, she had roamed the hallways, chambers and pathways of CaerCamelon like a disconsolate ghost, completely immersed in her own tragic thoughts and circumstance. Eirwen had retreated to the inner sanctity of her mind like a wounded vixen crawling back into her lair and sneaking up here each evening. Her pale and lovelorn figure had been the subject of concern for every single person who lived and worked in this fortress, as their young princess was beloved by them all. The corridors, reception chambers and passageways below had seemed deserted compared to what had come before, but it had suited her mood admirably tonight. This great fortress would soon be gearing up once more, this time for holy Beltain, and despite her sour mood, she could not ignore the tickle of excitement at this major event which was fast approaching.

Dawn had arrived barely an hour ago, signalling the midday mark, and the early summer sunshine had finally penetrated the towering eastern clouds, throwing up a pale-yellow fan of a thousand shattered rays. They lit the great river and its distant harbour with their elemental glory, making the huge lake which formed the *Cawg y Gwidan* look ablaze. From Eirwen's perch on these eastern battlements, together they looked like an enormous burning ladle, as the 'Bowl of Gwidan' reached towards her like a huge and liquid, metal spoon on this rough land below her, and with a long and equally fiery, curving handle sweeping toward the distant ocean, this stunning view never aged. Bathed in Bel's growing brilliance this morning, that glittering ladle hung from the sinuous and flaming curves of Arglwydd Linn Gwidan, where she finds the distant coast and broadens

into white flecked and red splashed ocean. Linn Gwidan's blazing, rippling waters lap at the timber wharfing of Porth Camelon at high tide, before snaking west and passing this eastern palisade almost directly below Eirwen on her familiar roost. All this combined to create a truly memorable sight on this spectacular but cold new day. At these thrilling but uncommon moments, Eirwen loved to look down between her dangling feet from these stark, dizzying heights and to the rocky foreshore below, as the fear always made her blood fizz and Lydia fret. Her melancholy was rudely broken by a high-pitched scream tearing across the sky above her, and it caused her eyes to flick upwards in alarm. She spotted the soaring sea eagle immediately even though it was so high, and it was merely a dark dot in the cloud strewn sky as it circled this great caer. Bledri nudged her hand with his cold wet nose, and she smiled down at him, patting his broad, shaggy head and making his tail swish happily.

"Yes, I've seen it Bledri, my cu-cŵn!" She thanked him with the common endearment, and Bledri held up his enormous and recently wounded paw. Eirwen looked down her nose at him as she took his huge paw in her hand. "It's all better now darling." She told him smiling, but her eyebrow arched as she looked again. "It's the wrong paw anyway you rogue!" She laughed, dropping his shaggy foreleg and looking back up to the heavens.

Eirwen quickly refocused on this huge monarch of the skies as it stepped its wings, elongated its powerful body and began to plummet. She had decided the sex of this fabulous bird immediately and even felt a tenuous connection with this falling, gimlet-eyed and feathered Branwen of the heavens. Her heart tripped and her spirit soared at this wonderful omen of freedom, and just days from holy Beltain it was particularly notable. Wide-eyed, Eirwen followed the downward arc of this streaking missile as the bird accelerated, ominously folding back her wings. Down she came, arrowing from the sky, and this bird of prey suddenly broke this dizzying plummet with her taloned feet extending, and she struck. Whatever unfortunate bird had been the eagle's target, it exploded now in a sudden

puff of small feathers and as this magnificent huntress slammed into the frail frame of her prey, her talons snapping shut around the bony carcass in a blink. Casually tearing the head from that captured bird, she flipped gracefully upside down into a breathtaking and swooping curve, one which propelled this ultimate predator back into the heavens in another blink of an eye. Eirwen's eyes glittered, and her pulse was racing as she sent a secret prayer to Arglwydd Branwen at that moment, and in sincere gratitude for her blessing. She almost turned to speak to Lydia about it then before realising abruptly once more that she missed her constant companion, as Lydia was visiting her sick mother at the shoreside village in Gabrantofica; that wild eastern coastal land she hailed from. Eirwen only really appreciated Lydia fully when she was away and as it dawned on her each time just how much she depended on her. It was not just the work she did for her personally which in itself was invaluable, on reflection, it was her unbroken loyalty and down-to-earth pragmatism that she missed the most. Regardless of that young girl's naivety in many areas of courtly life, she had a bright mind and a sharp wit too which always lifted Eirwen's spirits. They had laughed together every day she could remember, and since that day she had agreed to become her handmaiden they had become almost inseparable. Now that Eirwen was at her most melancholic, she missed her all the more.

"Come on Bledri, let's take a walk around the battlements before we break our fast, it will blow some more cobwebs away!" She sighed, and Bledri stood happily, giving his mistress a little *woof* in response with his tail wagging.

They had just crested the tall flight of steps leading up to the fighting platform of the northern battlements when a familiar young arwein approached her breathlessly, and with his prominent ears glowing as he had clearly been tearing around this great fortress looking for her. "Your Highness Princess Eirwen!" He panted, and Bledri licked his flushed but familiar face, making the boy blush deeper and begin to stutter.

“Spit it out Calder.” She smiled at the squire. Bledri did his best to distract him as young Calder gained his breath and tried to do just that, the dog pushing his huge, cold and wet nose up one leg of the boy’s knitted woollen shorts.

“Ddugesi Meleri of the Myrun Isles is here my lady, she asked me to let you know.” Calder said between breaths, still trying to wriggle from Bledri’s discomfoting greeting. Eirwen’s face lit up at the news.

“Did she say anything else?” She asked him, turning to head back down this steep ramp of steps.

“Ddugesi Meleri is here to see King Ederus my Lady, but she also asked that you join her after her meeting with the king in the western croeso room.” He told her earnestly as he followed her down the stairs with the huge Bledri at his heels, standing easily as tall as the boy and with his tail still wagging happily.

Eirwen paced the flagstones of this large welcome chamber alone now, not daring to hope that Lady Meleri could persuade her father to allow her to begin the new term at the Ynys Myrun College and end her confinement. Her father had not told her she *would* or *would-not* be returning to complete her studies at *Côr Ynys Gwyn*, and she had been too scared of his answer to ask him. King Ederus had remained largely aloof since the dressing down he had given her on her return with Olwydd that day. Her father had regaled her mercilessly in his private chambers, and words and phrases like ‘irresponsible’, ‘rash’, ‘over-indulged’ and ‘immature’ had washed over her. Olwydd Hîr had also been present during this berating, and Eirwen would have been mortified at his presence in the past, but they had become close friends on their return to CaerCamelon that awful day. His huge presence had actually bolstered her courage, as Olwydd had nodded encouragement to her periodically from where he had leaned against the wall by the hearth in his easy manner. She had felt the support of his great warrior spirit in the room with her and had seen the same support in his eyes as she recounted honestly to her father every detail of her overnight sojourn and the subsequent events which had

taken place. She had come to realise that one of the most feared warriors in all Prydein had a soft heart, at least in her regard. She knew fine well too that his love was fatherly and honourable, and she felt the same way about him, as if he were the father she would have chosen that oppressive evening given a choice. Saving her life too had sparked that filial connection, it had for her anyway.

Eirwen continued pacing the doeskin floor rugs of this exclusive welcome chamber for waiting nobles now, still deep in thought. An attentive arwein stuck his head around the door with raised eyebrows and a questioning look sometime later, but she waved him away before he could even open his mouth, and so he withdrew tactfully. It felt like the hours of her life were being sucked from her soul as she waited impatiently and yet she was still surprised when the honourable Ddugesi Meleri, her tutor and mentor strode into the room. She appeared suddenly in the doorway, with her usual handmaiden scuttling after her like one of the harbour ducklings chasing its mother.

“There you are darling!” Meleri smiled broadly, holding out her right hand.

Eirwen took her bony hand in hers and bowed deeply, kissing the solid silver, star and crescent moon ring of their order with due reverence, before rising and hugging her matriarch warmly.

“I’ve never been more glad to see you!” Eirwen blurted, and Meleri broke the embrace, gripping her shoulders and looking deep into her eyes.

“Come child let us talk in my lodgings, as we have much to discuss!” She smiled, taking Eirwen’s arm and leading her down the familiar passage to the guest chambers, her walking cane *tap-tapping* on the flagstones in a welcome tattoo.

Out of the blue, Eirwen felt the gloomy weight lift from her shoulders and a calming, joyous feeling surge through her. Her steps became lighter, her chin came up and her hopes suddenly flared brightly once more.

Beside her, the druiden’s eyes glittered with the effort.



Chapter Eight.

King Caswallawn *Fawr* of the southern Brythonic House of Casufelawny had come home, at least to his spiritual home; Khumry. He relaxed now on a sumptuous, padded couch, his leg thrown over the arm and with his leonine head resting on a soft, lambswool pillow. He had come on horseback almost two hundred miles to reach this famous druidic college of Dinas Dinlle in Llandwrog, arriving the previous evening at nearby DunAst; the Gorddofican fortress on Bryn Gaer which overlooks the beach and this collegiate campus. Arriving with his personal guard, Caswallawn had ended a week of tortuous travelling, relishing the royal welcome he had received and of course the subsequent evening's revelry. This outpost land of the Ganganiau was ever reliant on the support of allies, and the high king of the Brythonau Dde had been a welcomed but exhausted royal guest at this college.

This growing coastal tref and the little port below the fortress which supports this collegiate community face hallowed Ynys Môn, and they all look across the rushing straits of Menai to that holiest of all Prydein's islands. The fishermen, the salt workers and the eagle-eyed lookouts of DunAst can all look west to where this fast body of water broadens, and much further, right across that tempestuous sea to the distant Iweriuan coast, merely a dark smudge on the horizon on the brightest of these early summer days. Llandwrog and Gangania as a whole is situated in one of the most dangerous parts of western Prydein, as it is the frontline in their defences from Iweriuan *scotting* and has been for many generations. The canny Brythons have bolstered this threatened Ganganian peninsula for that same long period with countless warriors, and against the almost perennial incursions of raiding *scots*. They usually came from an Eblani alliance of vassal tribes gathered in their largest port of Duibhinn in eastern coastal Iweriu, and there had been reports of another *ionradh*

brewing there. The ruling Fír-Eblani had that big natural harbour at its disposal and the many *raths* around it as they call their caers and their duns. The Eblani's famed 'black-pool' warriors had long raided the western coast of Khumry, as had their close northern neighbours the Fír-Ouolunti. Those bold Iweriuan tribes had several times attempted to take, hold and settle this long finger of land which lay under the shadows of the towering, snow laden crags of Eryri, but the valiant mountaineering warriors of these northern Khumric highlands have always managed to dislodge these raiders and send any survivors back over the Iweriuan Sea. It was a constant challenge, but they had been aided in this for many years by espionage, and by being bolstered each year by a great number of allied warriors from across the nation. Iweriu was no easy posting for any spy, as all had been discovered eventually and executed swiftly over the years. However, this too was an ongoing task, and these covert appointments were by necessity among the Iweriu themselves as foreign infiltrators would not last a morning. Nothing saved lives and aided successful defence like forewarning, and the Gorddofican ruling class of Khumry had spent much gold in constantly developing their sources of intelligence across that wild western sea, thankful that many people chose to secretly sacrifice their loyalty for that gleaming, indestructible yellow metal. Latest news suggested that the Khumry's rare, alluvial gold had been well spent on this occasion.

This renowned *Athrofa y Derwydd* of Dinas Dinlle is surrounded by a sprawling number of thatches, workshops and storerooms, all set within a sylvan clearing three hundred reeds from the rocky northern shoreline of Gangania and the hilltop fortress of DunAst. The long, oval thatches of this druidic college surrounded a tall timber dream-tower, constructed in the centre of a wide courtyard and it would sway alarmingly in any stiff wind. This renowned centre for spiritual learning drew students from all over these Khumric lands and from across Prydain and Gallia. This year, even the son of a famous Greek *meddyg* from Athens had made the long and dangerous voyage, coming all the way from the pagan capital of those mythical and exotic lands to expand his medical and religious knowledge

here. Caswallawn got up and stretched his long, aching legs, watching the stewards rush around this thatched hall, clearing away the benches and tables which had been used for today's important *crychiad*. He had made sure his beloved horse Meinlas was well cared for, and a tiny nodule of silver which he was in the habit of using for such small payments had been pressed into a groom's hand, ensuring that she had been well-stabled, fed and watered. That fabulous and slender grey mare was of direct Trojan bloodline, and she was his unabashed pride and joy. Meinlas was comforted now in dry fresh straw and in the warm shelter of the stable block across the courtyard, and Caswallawn could relax.

The earlier Ganganian war council had been successful despite the bickering and a quarrel between the leaders of two families which stemmed from a long-held dispute, but accord had been eventually reached between them and a joint commitment had been voiced by all. Caswallawn had spoken at length about the news and latest intelligences received about the ruthless Roman conquerors in Gallia, and all had been appalled at the latest atrocities perpetrated by the merciless Roman wolf who led them. News takes weeks to travel the length of this country especially to these far-flung outposts, and the truth in this news as always is presaged by rumour, and only the wise can separate the two like the wheat from its chaff. Caswallawn had confirmed many fears and dispelled a few rumours too, but he had eventually brought these northern Khumry completely up to date with current happenings to the far north and to the far south of Prydein. He had also informed them that on the orders of their Gorddofican leadership, many hundreds of doughty Essyllyr warriors would soon be coming up from Khumry Calon and Khumry Dde to reinforce their defences and will more than triple their numbers. Being known as the *aer y derwydd* in their service to Prydein's priesthood and becoming literally the 'fire of the druids', their legend was assured. The Gorddoficaeu, led by Caswallawn's infamous brother Lludd were also widely known to lead the Essyllwyr; the 'Hammer' of the Khumry in their priestly duties and other more secular undertakings, and supported by this unmatched soldiery, the Gorddofican nobility has flourished over the

intervening centuries. As they hold the *rheolwr y grym* over all the tribes of the Khumry, the Gorddofican aristocracy rule supreme, and their subordinate army is made up of many contrasting tribesmen. The iron backbone of this huge martial force however is undoubtedly the *Hammer* of the Khumry; the indomitable, unmatched Essyllwyr who now fill the great belly of this country. Only one king rules Khumry's six holy tribes, and Lludd *Llaw Ereint* being the heir to Beli Mawr was the unquestionable present ruler of their six hundred caers. Every *House* of Khumry is vassal to them, and the Gorddoficau strongholds are in all vassal territories. They run their vast prefecture from two capital caers and just a handful of other, smaller *watch*-fortresses throughout Khumry, but their authority is irrefutable. Sacred and mountainous, *Gogledd* Khumry is overseen by Nynniaw from his high fortress in the north of Eryri at DunGorddwyg, and near the foot of Arglwydd Wyddfa, which is that country's highest and most revered peak. Lludd rules all Khumry, and he controls midland and southern Khumry from his huge capital fortress on the southern plains, founded in the heartland of Essyllyria and known to all as CaerAu. Over the centuries, the six tribes of Khumry have coalesced into a fearsome and highly organised military society under its Gorddofican rulers, capable of moving its forces great distances to defend its borders. The kings of the Iweriu were always very much aware of world events, and if most of the best warriors in Khumry and Prydein were soon heading south to prevent a Roman invasion, it could prove a prospect too enticing to be missed for those ruthless, perennially lickerish warlords. Khumry's difficulties were ever their opportunities in the past, and so the Ganganian forces will be bolstered once again to counter any opportunistic attacks from the west. All this would take a great deal of organisation and more than a little gold, but this was Caswallawn's primary goal here. These undertakings were much eased by existing accommodations, as this kind of reinforcement was not uncommon. All the neglected barrack thatches would need repairing in and around the nearby fortress, and many trees will need felling for the cartloads of kindling and firewood required. Much game will need to be caught, killed, butchered and salted too before their arrival,

but the oaths and promises had all been made, nonetheless. A great deal of information had also been shared before the crychiad had come to a boisterous but amicable end, and which had all been gratefully received by these northwestern combrogi. Although the outcome was hardly in doubt as the Ganganians were always desperate for support, Caswallawn had been pleased with the results nonetheless, as he could appease his tidy mind with a notch of completion on his imaginary coelbren memory stick.

Those northern Khumric princes and their gŵyrd had all left the campus enclosure of Dinas Dinlle in clouds of dust and just a few hours previously, but Caswallawn remained as he awaited the arrival of another long-distance traveller. He was one who had also travelled a long way, coming by way of the great midland federation of Breged, but this well-travelled individual had spent the previous three days over the nearby Menai Straits in Môn and at the legendary and deeply mystical, primary *llwyn y derwydd* on that sacred island. That particular druid's *nyfed* was unique as it was the first and most sacred grove of all, founded within a pincer-shaped clearing in the bedrock and around Prydein's primary and holiest spring. Caswallawn had seen this secret and magic hidden grove for himself as a young boy, and its image was burned deeply into his retinas and into his soul. It had been one dark Samhain night, and although he had been with his all-powerful tad Beli Mawr, that experience had changed him forever. It had seemed to him at the time, that the misty pool in the centre of that deep forest clearing and the high, densely wooded ridge which almost surrounded HênDdu's utterly secret grove had been filled with watching, malevolent spirits. The power of HênDdu's grove seemed to flow from an anonymous spring at the centre of that bowl like hollow, and no one knew the name of the primal God or Goddess who inhabited that holiest of all issues from the Underworld, except of course for AurArian himself and his long, long line of all-powerful predecessors. The hairs on Caswallawn's arms and nape rose painfully at the traumatic memory of that first visit so long ago, especially at the sudden mental image of that terrifying *altar*. The centrepiece of that

mystical *nyfed* was the truly ancient *allor y derwydd*, and that oaken 'druid's altar' had stood in the most deeply forested and hallowed oak grove of all, that of HênDdu himself. That secret enshrouded, deeply mystical edifice was known as the *first* altar, as it was founded around the prime and most sacred but anonymous spring in all of Môn, Khumry, Prydain and the world. HênDdu's legendary altar had been made many generations ago and from a complete and fully grown oak tree, with both female flowers and male acorns showing. It had been uprooted and buried again in a natural bowl in that rocky outcrop and alongside that anonymous and sacred spring, upside-down and in a vast hole. HênDdu's hideous, dark and twisted altar was the enormous, black tentacled trunk and root bole of that ancient, upturned oak, and the horizontal surface had been scraped back to an almost flat top to allow the druid his rituals. Above the almost primeval but still visible turf line around that inverted trunk, the enormous ring of primary roots which sprung from the circular edge of that tree altar had been left in-situ and trained downwards until they entered the ground again, completing the sacred circle of death. HênDdu's terrifying altar had looked like a black and monstrous, many legged insect about to pounce, and it had made a profound and lasting impression on man and boy. Living serpents of *tarth y derwydd* always writhed around that horrifying altar, and this perpetual 'druid's mist' needed no breeze to swirl and to slink into the hollows. Long, icy fingers of this spirit mist had curled around Caswallawn's skinny legs that night as he had watched agog, and he could clearly remember the hot urine running down both legs in his abject terror. That deeply scarred and notched altar top had been stained a deep brown from the blood of the endless sacrifices over the centuries, and Caswallawn shivered involuntarily at the memory of the monstrous, black and spider ridden dreams that had persecuted him each long night afterward, and for many weeks. He had been deeply awed at the sight of that dread altar, with its curving, convoluted ring of black roots which twisted and writhed downwards, conveying the sacrificial blood down, back into the soil they were torn from so long ago....

Caswallawn shook himself out of these haunting memories and sat upright, nodding to the *arwein*, realising that his heart was hammering and that he was breathing heavily, his palms sweaty. He accepted the refill with a grateful nod and calmed himself, taking a long draught of the excellent local mead. Focusing on the present once more, Caswallawn appreciated that this man he waited to meet was no ordinary man, as he awaited the presence of his oldest brother and the head of the family. He would travel back the long miles south in his company and Caswallawn was impatient to return to his kingdom, as no king could be sure of events at home whilst they were away. In fact, Caswallawn was living proof of his own wisdom as he had only come to power in the south of Prydain by slaying King Dunfallawn of the Trinobantau whilst he was out of his kingdom on business, and Caswallawn was ever nervous of the same thing happening to him. He had those months ago cut off the head of what he believed was a serpent of treachery, a black coiling thing that could undo all their vital planning for the coming war. His Lynx emblazoned shield men had poured over DunCelmer's walls to offer a great slaughter to all its soldiery, including the king and his personal guards. Prudence had demanded no taking of heads however and the safe keeping of the slain king's family. To the relief of all Trinobanta, Dunfallawn's son; Crown Prince Afarwy was absent and had been for many years. Dunfallawn's heir was highly regarded as one of the leading diplomats of Prydain, and he had spent his entire adult life learning the ancient tenets and disciplines of international diplomacy, but under a different name. Crown Prince Afarwy ap Dunfallawn of the ancient House of the Trinobantau is also known as one Lord Androgeus of the much respected 'Diplomatic Order of Llysgennau', and he has become a renowned diplomat and orator in manhood. More than this, *Androgeus* was the Ambassador appointed to take Caswallawn's supplication for armed assistance to King Ederus of Galedon. It was a 'National' plea however and supported by the country's druidry; in that Ederus' Galedonian forces should ally with the federations of Albion and Breged,

and together as one holy 'triad' they should travel south to resist the impending Roman invasion.

Lord Androgeus' obvious intellect and his staggering Brythonic vocabulary, which included many of the old forgotten dialects, words and phrases allowed him to say precisely what was required in any situation. His sharp wit and his renowned wisdom gave him the ability to speak to all walks of life in a mellifluous, even poetic manner, and these gifts had got him noticed in all the right places. The fact that he spoke Persian, Latin and Greek as well as many Galliad dialects made him indispensable to the order, and he had represented many kings, queens and princes across Prydein and Gallia over the intervening years. Now however, Androgeus was required to return to his tribe's capital DunCamulo, and there desired by them to swap the cap and the long flowing gown of an ambassador for the war gear of a tribal king, but he had one huge mission to complete as Lord Androgeus before he would decide. Latest reports stated that he had been travelling north for more than a week in this endeavour and would be in high Galedon by now. He *had* to complete this final, crucial task given him by his order before he could return to the eastern coastlands of Trinobanta, for a bitter abdication but a welcomed return to the sacred order. Or he would give up the professional life and accept kingship, taking his ancient rite of ascension and taking too the ritual walk against the sun at midnight. This would be immediately followed by him receiving the golden, triple-crown and becoming King Afarwy ap Dunfallawn of the House Trinobanta. No one knew which path the regal Lord Androgeus would choose, and many wondered if he even knew himself.

Caswallawn had known for some time as had many of Prydein's leading families, that since Dunfallawn's death, the three subsequently ungoverned vassal Houses to Trinobanta had chosen a deeply unpopular path. With the ruling throne empty, they had been swayed by their vanquished cousins in Gallia to throw their lot in with General Caesar, as no nation on earth had yet withstood his professional Roman might. Those

in Prydain who had need of such knowledge, knew that those Trinobantan rebels had sworn allegiance to Rome and had promised further aid in his impending invasion. They had with other Belgic tribes in the south sent secret envoys and emissaries to offer their cygils to Caesar himself. Whatever other promises had been made, their treachery had not gone unnoticed. In view of all this, Caswallawn had by necessity subdued those neighbouring tribes of the Trinobantau; all Gallic settlers and who's lands hug the north-eastern coastline of Prydain to the north of Aber Tafwys. These Belgic Houses were fierce and had allied in their resistance to Caswallawn's Brythonic spearmen, but this son of Beli Mawr would not be denied and Dunfallawn's great treasure had been taken. Once Caswallawn's troops had scattered the local tribes, he and his gŵyrd had stormed the caer and smashed their way into the old strong room. All the dead king's metal was now his and sitting in his secure vault at his capital stronghold; the vast and sprawling CaerGwlyb. Leaving his own capital fortress in the huge and capable hands of his pencampwr Berwyn, Caswallawn had spent many days in the saddle to be here, and his body ached now from the ordeal. His son Tasgyofan was too young yet to competently serve in his stead, but his champion Berwyn was an astute leader and ruled well in his absence with a hard but fair hand.

A young *arwein* headed his way, breaking his reverie and coming to bow deeply before him.

"You asked me to let you know majesty when riders approach." He said in his lilting local accent and was about to continue when the thunder of hooves outside pre-empted him, making Caswallawn laugh.

"Fetch food and fresh ale lad!" The high king of the Southern Brythons demanded of the boy but with a smile, and the young squire bowed again before hurrying off to the kitchens.

Caswallawn moved tenderly to the door and pulled it open with a dry *creak* from its hinges, where he ducked under the tatty fringe of the thatch and stepped out into the cool evening air. A clear, black and starlit dome was spread above him and from where a cheerful crescent of

Derwen moon smiled down upon him. There were about a dozen steaming, jostling horses and men now at the long stable block across the yard, and a pair of these late arrivals left their steeds with squires before turning and heading his way. The unmistakeable figures of his family members and two of the most famous rulers in Prydein approached, his brother Lludd along with his son and heir Crown Prince Afalach who rules Gorddofica's military forces. Afalach commands the *Hammer* of the Khumry from his own capital stronghold of CaerLlanmelyn, which lies in the heartland of Essyllyria in southern Khumry and is festooned in red dragon banners. Caswallawn's fabled brother and his honoured nephew crossed this large courtyard, skirting the wide base of the high dream tower, and both were smiling as they trod wearily toward him. Lludd raised his left hand in greeting and Caswallawn smiled broadly back at them both, noticing how similar they looked now they were so close together. They looked like brothers, as Lludd looked a fit man in his late twenties, belying almost fifteen years with his rugged good looks and lack of any grey hair on his noble head. If Caswallawn had not known better, he would have accused him of supping the Beltain dew. Afalach is twenty-two in years and is as tall and as impressive as his father, but broader across the shoulders and with more developed limbs. Afalach has a great bulging chest like a barrel, which tonight displayed the fabled flaming war-hammer cygil of their Gorddofic ruling House, overlaying the red dragon of his own House.

Recalling all the years of Afalach's life, Caswallawn thought back six or-so years and to a time when this young prince had been virtually uncontrollable. Afalach had gone buck wild with a rowdy gang of followers, living in the forests and generally making a great and persistent nuisance of themselves. In his opinion back then, the boy and all his merry band of sycophantic brigands were destined for the rope, for all they did was get blind drunk around their forest campfires or they would get high on mushrooms and bother the locals with their raucous behaviour. They would hunt anywhere they chose to and go cross border cattle raiding at a whim, embarrassing his all-powerful family and undoing much diplomatic

work in those same neighbouring territories. It had taken a concerted family effort to bring this headstrong and unruly young prince back into the fold and on the right track, but the sons of Beli Mawr always achieved what they set out to achieve. Caswallawn was proud that Afalach had found his own way back into usefulness, recommitting to a more acceptable 'regal' life and regaining much lost respect and family standing. In those intervening years he had grown into an excellent leader and a much-feared fighter, that much was clear just from looking at him. Caswallawn was proud too of his own input into this great family success story, and his nephew now looked to be an exceptionally strong and capable warrior. His face echoed the features of his handsome father, and the eyes were the same piercing and intelligent blue which missed nothing and could blaze with a cold, dangerous blue light when aroused. Both were dressed for long-distance riding in long black leather boots and long leather coats with deep hoods of the same dark hue, but their hoods were thrown back and royal torcs gleamed at their throats in this moonlight, leaving no doubt as to their lofty status and their impeccable lineage.

"Caswallawn!" Lludd was the first to speak, throwing his arms open and the brothers embraced warmly.

"Lludd, it's been too long brother!" Caswallawn admitted, thumping his brother on the back before turning to his nephew, who bowed deeply.

"Afalach, my *cu-nai*!" He declared, calling him by his familiar name of beloved-nephew and giving him the same enormous bearhug, followed by a similar good thumping on the back.

"Honoured uncle, it is a true pleasure to see you again lord king." Afalach responded respectfully and with a cough as his lungs settled back into place.

"I think we can dispense with all that lord and king nonsense Afalach! Come in, and you can both eat as we talk." Caswallawn offered, throwing his right arm around the broad, muscular shoulders of his nephew and

leading him into the refectory. They both had to stoop to pass under the drooping thatch, and it seemed Caswallawn's aches had vanished suddenly. For the first time in over three years, two of the four remaining, infamous red dragons of Prydain were in one place together along with their fierce dragonet. All were the bri-laden issue of Beli Mawr himself and so, even the indolent Gods of this precious land must have sat up to take notice.

Caswallawn had already eaten, but he enjoyed watching these two hungry men tear into the cold cuts of venison, pork, lamb and ham laid before them, along with soft warm bread from the bakery and freshly brewed curmi-da in big wooden logs. He sipped warm mead himself from a beautiful silver cup, and as these latecomers relaxed and drained their logs of beer, he brought them up to date with all the preparations and achievements of the earlier *crychiad*, the promises made and the oaths he had taken.

Lludd belched hugely, and he wiped his mouth before smiling in satisfaction and pleasure at his brother. "Ahh, the most excellent Cwrmi Seithenyn!" He sighed, smacking his lips. "It's the gorse they add to the mash here brother as you know, and I have missed its unique flavour." Lludd smiled again and took another deep draught of his favourite Ganganian beer.

"Ay, and strong enough to float a horseshoe!" Afalach gasped, his eyes swimming as he slammed the empty drinking log to the table.

Caswallawn nodded smiling, knowing well his family's love of fine ale, but it was one he did not share, and he quickly changed the subject.

"How was AurArian Aruchel?"

"He is well of course, and all matters religious have been decided brother following a successful Imbolc, and amidst much ritual and crucial sacrifice as is their ponderous way." Lludd answered him with a wry grin, rolling his eyes and wiping his voluminous moustaches with a finger. "How is

Tasgyofan? I haven't seen him in so long!" Lludd asked in return, and Caswallawn nodded back at him with an indulgent smile.

"He is well Lludd. Seventeen soon!" He said of his son, and his own surprise at how the years had flown was mirrored on the faces of his guests. "And Nynniaw, how is our good brother?" Caswallawn countered, as he knew Lludd had visited Llŷn Gorddwyg; the deep lake at the foot of Arglwydd Wyddfa and its small lakeside treflan, before then climbing the cliffs to the high ramparts of the infamous dragon's lair at its crown. Nynniaw's towering capital fortress of DunGorddwyg and its growing, attendant citadel was a challenging climb, but once there Lludd could greet their brother and rest before continuing on his way across to Môn and more spiritual duties.

"He is well Caswallawn, but full of complaint as ever." Lludd answered him plainly, and they shared a smile at this age-old truth regarding their capable brother. "His royal duties have kept him from the sword post of late and the hunt, which as you know gall him above all else, and he has gained a few pounds, but his spirit is strong. You know I see his son Gwerdded more often than he, as he is in his ninth year of training as a dewin, so he keeps me abreast of events at our northern capital." Lludd reminded him, and Caswallawn smiled at the mention of their highly intelligent but also highly-strung nephew, who was not only nine years into the ferocious training of the warrior-wizard order of the dewin, but also ran the sacred and newly acquired Gorddofic stronghold of Caer y Tŵr on Môn. The now famous, high hilltop fortress of Caer y Tŵr dominates a smaller island situated off the north-eastern coast of the mother-isle, Môn. It lies in vassal Decawangly territory and had been a valuable island lookout post to that tribe for generations. Their hillfort possessed stunning views east, back across Môn and south to Eryri, but more importantly it had a fine outlook across the sea to the distant Iweriuan shore, which was usually a purplish, hazy smudge on clear days, low on the western horizon. The Decawangly tribe had been druid-ordered to give up that hilltop dun in favour of Gorddofica and in a truly dark

period in the history of this country. It was when Prydein had lost its high king and queen; these monarchs' legendary parents, who had been interred in a huge state funeral on the island following their tragic and unexpected deaths overseas.

"Gwerdded is flourishing brother." Lludd brought Caswallawn's thoughts back to the present with a jolt and his far gazing eyes back to him, once more naming their brother's son. "It seems the more we test him the more he excels, and his intellect is ferocious. HênDdu saw something in him when he was just a boy, and he was right. I think Gwerdded could be the finest dewin ever to swear on the gold acorn crown!" Lludd told them seriously, and both his companions tilted their heads in approbation.

"That good? Stronger than you tad?" Afalach asked him pointedly and with a twinkle in his eyes, earning a wry grin from his father.

"Yes son, maybe even me in time, but he has a long and difficult road to travel yet, in terms of the order anyway, but his leadership and stewardship of Caer y Tŵr is highly commendable. HênDdu told me some things about our esteemed nephew which could confirm his latent promise. I can't go into any details of course, but Gwerdded will I believe found an astonishing dynasty one day!" Lludd added with a thoughtful, distant look.

"If he lives that long!" Caswallawn stated the brutally obvious from across the table, as was his custom. Lludd and Afalach both nodded their agreement to this cold and hard fact of life in Prydein.

"Our Khumric *Llwgwaed*, as you know brother was oath-sworn with our blood at Imbolc!" Lludd got to the point, telling Caswallawn what he knew already. "We were eager to avenge the slaughter of our combrogi in Gallia, and thus sworn we could send warriors to Gwened in support. Not only in resistance to Roman aggression, but to try and restore our ancient sources of trade and access routes, which as you know now lie in tatters. All that remains is the swearing of the great *Llwgwaed* of the northern triad, which will take place at Lughnas on Fro Usver and in Bellnor's

capital fortress." Here Lludd paused. "And of course, yours." He added pointedly and with shrewd eyes, aware of the difficulties Caswallawn was having in achieving the same unity among the Houses of his southern Brythons. Caswallawn snorted, shaking his head.

"I know brother, and I am doing all in my power to bring it about. I doubt very much that I will be able to do so for Beltain, so I too plan for Lughnas" His response was pragmatic, but he shook his head again.

"Almost half of the Belgic Houses want to sue for terms, and we don't even know for sure if that Roman bastard's coming here yet! If he does, he's not fool enough to come before the harvest. That wet fool Dunfallawn was the creator of this traitorous movement as gold was ever his mistress. He, Ochor and his three vassal Houses have been doing all the Roman arse licking, with sycophantic emissaries flitting here and there across the channel. Dunfallawn and Commios had both been busy in spreading this treason across southern Prydein, and the world and his wife knows how much Commios hates me and has always sought the downfall of Casufelawny. Something had to be done brother. I had to risk much and send many good men to remove Dunfallawn, and I know what people say, that I slayed him for gold and political gain and both accusations are quite true. But both however were done for the right benefactor!" Caswallawn stated hotly, his eyebrows arched in challenge. "All men of wisdom know we will need much gold if we are to mobilise nearly all Prydein's great warriors and effectively prosecute this war we know is coming. The bastard of Rome won't come until after Lughnas I'm certain, but I'm also sure he *will* come, as his notorious debts are large and pressing."

Caswallawn pointed out sagely, and his two guests nodded at this wisdom of the age. "And the political advantage of subduing my weak neighbours at the very root of this rebellion is Prydein's more than it is mine!" He added with feeling. "And yet it is me who will have to live alongside them, and I will be forced to continually subdue them at great personal cost. I'm disturbed still by it all, as they are ever a vengeful set of Belgic tribes, and it is widely known that they carry a *galanas* for centuries!" He paused bitterly, to get his breath back and to take a long drink.

“This possible ‘blood-feud’ that concerns you brother is unlikely, as the people who need to know, know well your motives Caswallawn, but the primary concern remains, as it would be unthinkable for you *not* to complete the necessary blood-oath of undeb, being the host nation and the most threatened!” Lludd cautioned his brother, who nodded grimly back at him. “Is there anything we can do to aid you in this regard brother?” He added, and Afalach sat up, signalling his own interest.

“Your presence at our great *cymgad* in CaerGwlyb at the end of Collen, a little more than two months hence would be much appreciated brother, as would yours Afalach!” Caswallawn nodded to his nephew.

“We will both be there brother on that you can depend, whatever good it will do, but we will of course confirm the proposed great blood-oaths of the allied triads at your war council. We will also try to illustrate the impossible position northern Trinobanta and the Belgau face, and with little choice in reality if a catastrophic civil war is to be avoided, and at the worst time imaginable!” Lludd offered gravely.

“The Gods deny!” Afalach voiced their joint prayers, and all three kissed iron to avert the ill omen in the spoken words.

“Indeed Afalach, but much must be achieved by mortal man first before our Gods will deign to support us.” Caswallawn stated the obvious. “All the vassal kings, princes and the gŵyrd must attend as they are druid commanded by HênDdu himself as you know.” He continued in the same concerned vein. “I believe Tasgyofan and I have made inroads with Epyll of late, so I think Atrebata will be neutral at least. The rest will do as instructed I’m sure, but I still worry about those three disgruntled houses of northern Trinobanta. That nest of treacherous vipers who must also be there will do nothing but sow dissent without a real damn king to control them!” Caswallawn gave this prediction ruefully and with another shake of his head. “And, as the world and his wife knows, the next-in-line to the Trinobantan throne is Prince Afarwy, only he isn’t bloody Prince Afarwy is he? Hasn’t been for years!” Caswallawn spat out his frustration. “He is at this moment in Galedon leading a delegation of Ambassadors in *my*

supplication for allied assistance as one Lord Androgeus! Ye Gods, it's all so bloody complicated!" He swore and shook his big head again. Lludd laughed.

"The machinations of mortal man were ever thus brother!" Lludd informed him with a grin, but this vanished as his eyes sparkled a dangerous blue and his solid silver hand thumped on the table. Lludd leaned toward to his brother with a serious face. "I know since their allowed arrival these many generations past we have been ever generous and have shied from the term *vassals* in regard to our Belgic cousins, in honour of our similarities and their bri perhaps. Most of them are loyal, but in the cold light of day brother they are merely that; immigrant vassal tribes, and latecomers at that. Permanent guests, but *guests* nonetheless, who will be righteously educated as to their lowly position in the ancient, Brythonic pecking order of Prydein should they be foolish enough to refuse their orders." Lludd told him coldly and with the crackling, unmistakable authority he was known for. "Irresistible powers are moving inexorably brother, which will make all of Trinobanta's issues look like a mere speck of dust in the great scheme of this holy event, and one which will shake the very foundations of this sacred earth before it ends!" Lludd added ominously. "Nothing will happen until after Lughnas we know for certain, as at present, Caesar has very few ships at his disposal, but much work has been done to swell his fleet from building anew to rebuilding commandeered vessels from our subdued Galliad combrogi. We are sure his invasion is planned for the end of this swiftly approaching summer, and HênDdu himself will be at your crychiad Caswallawn, and sworn king or no sworn king, he will demand the total cooperation of the Trinobantau and all the other Belgic Houses, or they will be removed from the face of this earth by us all!" Lludd stated powerfully.

Caswallawn smiled broadly, as one of his thorniest problems had just been effectively eased. The Trinobantan and Belgic alliance will have no recourse but to capitulate and to contribute if they wanted to continue living in Prydein. It was possible too that Androgeus would give up the

professional life and return to his ancestral lands to accept the crown, becoming King Afarwy before the great Brythonic war council convened, which would be good news as all in Prydain knew his thoughts and views on the wolf of Rome. *King Afarwy's* three protesting vassal kingdoms would be presented with a *fait-accompli* if he took the crown; obey their lawful king and become part of the Brythonic alliance or be destroyed by the terrifying *aer y derwydd* and at a whim of the *brif-druid*. It was as if a heavy ox-yoke had just been lifted from Caswallawn's shoulders, and he realised too with another sharklike smile that he had until the night of the great crychiad on the 26th day of Collen to use other, more nefarious means to solve the problem with his neighbours. After all, they did occupy the most bountiful land, which was blessed with a wonderful and rich brown soil. His face was inscrutable as he caught the eye of an observant *arwein*, calling for more mead before continuing thoughtfully.

"Although unfinished, *CaerGwlyb* is big enough to accommodate all who must attend including their large retinues, and all which may be required is in place. I suppose *CaerMencipiwr* would have done at a push, but we have decided on my east midland capital for the pivotal crychiad, and so all preparations are in hand." Caswallawn told them both absently, his mind filled with the myriad details of this huge undertaking.

"*Mencipiwr*? I know it's from the old dialect brother, but I've always thought it a strange name. 'Place of the snatchers'?" Lludd queried with a raised eyebrow, and Caswallawn nodded, his eyes refocussing.

"If you walked around the tref at night you'd discover why!" He qualified with a grin, causing both his guests to laugh. "There is a broad plain of land which lays further northeast above *CaerGwlyb* and is spacious enough to accommodate the massed assembly of soldiers due. My inner caer is more than large enough for the ceremony and the huge numbers of expected aristocracy, and I would very much welcome your presence." Caswallawn continued, nodding to them both.

"We will be there Uncle, and if those treacherous vassals cause a disturbance, we will deal with them harshly!" Afalach spat, and Lludd

nodded at his side with that wicked, terrifying smile of his, both men clearly used to total and immediate compliance from their subordinates. Caswallawn relaxed now, his mind moving to other matters as he sipped his warm and delicious mead.

“Well, I’m hoping it won’t be necessary, as if Androgeus returns in time to claim his throne and attends as King Afarwy, we won’t have a problem. He could make it back in time, but it’s getting out of Galedon that takes the longest, especially if the weather is bad.” Caswallawn ventured from bitter experience, smacking his lips.

“The weather’s always bad in Galedon!” Afalach qualified drily from similar personal experience, and they all laughed at the inherent truth in his words.

“How is business at Aber Tafwys?” Caswallawn asked Lludd from across the table as he was ever the entrepreneur. More importantly, Lludd’s new development on the great south-eastern Linn and the estuary of Arglwydd Tafwys which the Belgic tribes call the Tamesa remained of great interest to him. The new and vital trade her outflow now offered him was invaluable but only gained through his brother, as *officially* it had always been denied him. Caswallawn’s kingdom of Casufelawny and Atrebata to his south were the only two landlocked territories in all Prydain and they had never been blessed with access to open sea. Both had thus been held to ransom over foreign trade for a bard’s memory, particularly in regard to port and border fees. That situation had changed recently and in Caswallawn’s favour as his indomitable brother had established his fiefdom there with no opposition from the fragmented Trinobantan tribes.

“Business is good Caswallawn, very good. In fact, CaerAu runs itself really, especially with Twrgadarn at the helm, as his abilities in this regard are much envied brother as you know. However, my trading ventures on the Tafwys are exceeding all my expectations and have taken much of my time of late. My time spent there has been largely due to the freedom allowed by the excellence of my champion, but as a result I am now in need of more ships, more crews and many more warehouses, as the

demands for my imports far outweigh my ability to service them at the moment." Lludd responded cheerfully, and the lilt of his Khumric dialect added a charming melody to his deep voice, mostly when he was relaxed and in trusted company. Caswallawn smiled back across this table at his older brother and at the memory of much happier childhood days together when the five brothers had been the indestructible sons of a living God, and life's promise had stretched out infinitely to unseen and unperceived horizons. Their uniquely privileged future had seemed to reach gloriously and endlessly before them into a bejewelled summer glade of eternal sunshine, until the dark clouds had come to claim their legendary parents one Beltain, seven long years ago.

"Thankfully, your LludsDun will allow me to trade without the criminal wharfing fees levied by the Trinobantau and the Caintau, who as you know I was forced to deal with at prohibitive cost." Caswallawn said in gratitude, pushing his childhood memories aside.

"Ha, it's hardly a dun yet brother, more a trading post currently, but work is progressing on the new wharf and the bridge repairs are now complete. The foundation walls of the fort are growing taller each week." Lludd informed them both thoughtfully. "The outer palisade is now complete, and there is such a huge sprawl of thatches and workshops about the place, neither of you would recognise it!" He added jovially. "It is a verminous, murderous place brother, full of the refuse and the dregs of life. However, those people work hard, and they do as instructed, but even I would hesitate to walk its dung covered streets at night!" He told them seriously but to much laughter, and he could not help smiling himself at the nonsense. There was a brief lull in the conversation as an attentive arwein refilled their cups before withdrawing, and Lludd awaited his departure before continuing from long habit.

"I import so many things these days, from plates and bowls of Gallic or Greek pottery and fine glassware, gallons of wine of course and olive oil for the nobles." He checked his normal manifest off his living fingers with a crooked little finger of silver. "Farmer's seeds for the werrin, metal

ingots and even fish sauce from Iberia for the Essyllwyr!" He declared to them both enthusiastically. "Not to forget the big pots of *goshe*, that foul poppy-milk that everyone in the world wants now, not least the physicians and the druids! This potion comes many hundreds of miles beyond the counting and from a mystical, ancient place known only as the deep east, wherever the *cnuch* that is! But the bloody price of it now is exorbitant, especially with those Roman bastards roaming the continent like fleas on a stray dog!" He cursed, curling his lip. Lludd wet his whistle with the fresh beer before continuing quietly. "As you know I export much too, slaves, weapons, skins and furs, even dogs and horses, as both journeys must pay, but I desperately need more ships and more men!" He told them with feeling. "The output at Cwm Ystwyth has dwindled to almost nothing sadly regardless of the number of slaves I have digging up there, and unless I find some new deposits of gold soon I shall have to tighten my purse strings, and it won't be until after the harvest when I'll be able to oversee another dig. Sadly Caswallawn, we may be rather busy down on your south coast by then!" He proposed with a smirk.

"I will supply you with enough gold to build three new ships brother and to crew them, as your success on Linn Tafwys is entirely in my interest!" Caswallawn ventured, ignoring the jibe, and Lludd's face lit up. He smiled back at him across these rough and stained timbers, nodding.

"Business partners it is then!" Lludd stood and held out his vital left hand, and Caswallawn took it warmly in the usual way across the table. "I will send a bird with instruction for the work to begin, and you must come soon along with your gold and see the progress for yourself. I am in your debt brother." He thanked Caswallawn with a bow of his head.

"Don't mention it, it will be Dunfallawn's gold anyway!" Caswallawn replied raffishly with an exaggerated wink, and the two men laughed as they sat back down. "In truth!" He held his hands up, retaking his own seat. "I am returning half of Dunfallawn's treasury to Afarwy, Androgeus or whatever name in Lug's arse we call him!" Caswallawn cursed again, shaking his head. "Especially his father's arms whether he takes the

throne or not, as I believe it is his inheritance. But the other half will cover my outgoings in our national preparations for this war *and* our new business venture!" He said this with a magnanimous nod, and the faces of his family members around this long and battered old table were inscrutable in the firelight.

"I know a number of proven seamen in my trefs, good fighters too who would travel for permanent sailing work father. I will send them to you after the harvest." Afalach offered from alongside him. With a smirk, Lludd threw his sword arm about his son's broad shoulders.

"Yes Afalach, you had better send them along to *me* son, because they won't go to Caswallawn will they, as he isn't exactly known for his shipping fleet!" Lludd informed his son with a wink, and Afalach slapped his knee and hooted with laughter.

Across the table, his uncle adopted a regal air of imperious aloofness, but his eyes sparkled as he turned to smile smugly at them both.

"I am now!" He grinned.

"So, it's onwards and upwards then my honourable family! And with support such as this, how could any venture fail!" Lludd beamed at them both and then called the arwein back over. "Fetch some *wirod-mywyd* boy, as this undertaking needs toasting with something a little stronger than beer or mead!" He commanded, massaging his right forearm absently as the arwein darted off to fetch the honey liquor.

"Talking of family brother, have you heard from Lleu recently?"

Caswallawn asked Lludd about their nephew King Lleu ap Rianaw, who now ruled the Galedonian House of Wenyllon in the high north following the death of their brother and Lleu's beloved father. The sadness of Rianaw's passing was still felt by them both, and Caswallawn caught his brother's eye as the unspoken prayer between them was sent to Lug in the Underworld. This was to the honour of their departed brother who had been their glorious tad's third son and their younger sibling. Rianaw had founded his northern dynasty on the eastern half of lowland Galedon

following the death of their revered father, but not without controversy. His rich capital fortress was CaerMelyn, which controlled all the lands around high Bryn Gowan and on whose crown that impressive fortress had been built. The eastern part of his wild northern territory was overseen by his secondary stronghold of DunBerth which overlooked both banks of the Linn of That and which had been built on the Plain of Rhynd in an accommodating bend in that major river. DunBerth controls a region of Wenyllon known to all as Tîr Wylun, which is the mysterious and spirit filled birthplace of the very best of Prydein's prophets; the sacred Uati. Lleu's father King Rianaw had died from a deep cut following a single-combat duel of *sarhaed* he had fought with Prince Cynan ap Cylan of Tawescally, a neighbouring kingdom to the north of Wenyllon. Although Rianaw had naturally vanquished his enemy, as no issue of Beli Mawr had ever been defeated in single combat, he had received a deep cut in the fight to his right thigh. The wound had festered, and no matter what was tried by the best meddygs in the land, he had burned up and died in a raging fever three days later. This sad event had taken place five years previously, and soon after, Rianaw's heir and their nephew Prince Lleu had taken the 'walk against the sun' and had reverentially accepted the Wenyllon throne under the midnight stars of his vital ascension, becoming King Lleu ap Rianaw ap Beli Mawr of Wenyllon. Following his tad's tragic death and his own coronation, their nephew Lleu had since proved to be a generous, honest and a popular king, carrying on the good work of his famous father. Two years after Lleu took the throne, he became popularly known as Lleu *Llaw Gyffes* due to a perfectly thrown honour-dagger from his 'agile hand', and which had pierced the eye of a visiting, drunken nobleman and sword champion at his wedding. Lleu had reached out to King Conal of Tawescally on the event of his marriage, attempting to heal the rift between their two Houses, but Conal had spurned his invitation, sending a minor lord in his stead. Lleu had even overlooked this insult, but that unknown visiting lord had taken a step too far in Lleu's jam-packed great hall. With a belly full of Lleu's finest mead, the arrogant fool had lewdly insulted his new and beloved wife in the glare of public view, and in

Lleu's own court. Without a moment's hesitation or one word of rebuke, Lleu had drawn his honour-dagger from his back and had thrown it in one fluid motion. With unerring accuracy, Lleu's bejewelled dagger had pierced that drunken lord's left eye, sinking fully six inches into his skull and killing him in that instant. The envious tribal leaders of that region had seized the opportunity to side with Tawescally and to rise up against Lleu in demonstration. However, in response to this rebellion, Lleu's royal uncle Llefelys ap Beli, the king of Armorica in north-western Gallia had sailed from there with a highly mobile but elite force of notorious warriors. Sailing boldly up the river Hafren in Khumry, he had joined Lludd, Nynniaw and Caswallawn there, and with their bands of infamous, chosen fighters, the '*Four Red Ravagers of Prydein*' had travelled north to Galedon, and all Prydein's Gods had been stirred to interest. That terrifying host had been preceded by terrible rumours and a veritable tidal wave of bri, and these great kings of Prydein and Aremorica in powerful support of their nephew had swept north through suddenly empty lands. That historic event had taken place three years previously as a ludicrous and unjustified *sarhaed* had been claimed, mostly in the attempted theft of Lleu's land by the long-envious Tawescally aristocracy. Many englyns have been written and sung by Prydein's bards since about the 'Blazing of the Dragons to Galedon', and that inspirational story has become Prydeinig legend. Within days of the four red dragons' arrival in Wenyllon, the conspirators from the surrounding tribes had been hunted down and slaughtered to a man by those vaunted and Godlike sons of Beli Mawr. Supported by the most accomplished swordsmen and the finest cavalry in all Prydein, they had then crossed the border into Tawescally and swept north to the root of the problem. All the tribes in that region had urgently sued for peace, as no one in authority would intervene or offer any aid. The names of those veteran warriors alone were enough to set most sane men running for the hills, but with the four unmatched sons of Beli himself leading these infamous combatants, a huge area around Tawescally and Wenyllon had been suddenly vacated in absolute panic. The werrin had fled with their children, stock and baggage into the surrounding hills of

Fachomagia, and to the caves and deep forest villages of Galedon in abject fear. The many huge fortress gates of the proud federation of Galedon had remained firmly shut, giving a clear indication to King Ederus and Galedon's *official* and complete disinterest. Those tribes around Wenyllon and southern Tawescally had capitulated in panic to prevent the further slaughter of their hopelessly outclassed warriors by these unstoppable lords of war, pledging everlasting vassal service. Wenyllon had grown in size, strength and influence from these notorious events, and the englyns were still sung in every tavern across these lands.

With no need for words, both brothers smiled across this worn and stained old table at each other and at these collective memories, when the sons of Beli had stormed north the length of Prydein unchallenged, and their eyes glittered at the shared joy, the honour and the bri.

"I saw Lleu before he petitioned Ederus for exclusion from the upcoming national llwgwaed and to make his own personal oaths as you know, so that he and his army could go to Llefelys' aid in Gwened." Lludd reminded his brother, breaking the spell. "He was well enough when I saw him, and much relieved that messages were received before he left that the aristocracy of Wyneda have reformed, and that they have finally joined in alliance with Llefelys' Gwenelly to resist the Romans." He added this with an arched eyebrow.

"Galedon isn't exactly short of warriors!" Caswallawn snorted. "Anyway, Llefelys and Lleu are our vanguard and will engage the Roman bastards first before the cal-munchers even get here! It's all in the same siot-pot brother, and although the Wynnellon and Llefelys' Gwenelly certainly have the numbers, I couldn't comment as to their valour!" He shrugged, chuckling. Both men laughed at this, but Caswallawn saw the dark shadow linger in his brother's eyes. "He'll be fine Lludd, remember his lineage!" He added, and Lludd nodded back, accepting the inevitable perhaps where their nephew was concerned. It was an age-old truth known to all, that young men turn into grown men and thus become warriors, and warriors seek war and bri above all else. Their brother and nephew

however were going to war abroad and against Caesar's crushing march of tyranny which had turned Galliad against Galliad, and the country had descended into a political, suicidal hell. No one knew who to trust as the kings and lords once perceived as the most steadfast and trustworthy had been among the first to secretly take the filthy gold of Rome, and all Gallia had become a twisting nest of treacherous, deceitful and murderous vipers.

Wyneda had been effectively conquered by the Romans several years ago and renamed Galatia by them, but its vast, sprawling group of tribes had always held a huge number of dissenters. A core of the fierce old Wynellon had reorganised of late, and once reassembled, they had allied with their previously decimated combrogi of Llefelys' Gwenelly and many proud independent Brythonic warriors from Aremorica and across those western territories. Brythons too had crossed the *Môr Udd* of their own volition, and these peerless individuals had come out of retirement or had given up honourable and lucrative tutorial positions to answer this urgent call to arms, and they had crossed the channel to face Caesar out of an unflinching sense of patriotic duty. These experienced Brythonic veterans now stiffened those Galliad ranks, and to the leaders of those battle shocked Galliad men, it made all the difference. Strong leadership had brought together those vanquished leaders and warriors who had been scattered to all four winds, and the survivors from their foremost families had reconsolidated recently, enough to lead a growing resistance movement across Aremorica against the undiminishing spread of merciless Roman conquest.

"Just think what would happen in Prydein if a king of the Brythonau acted like that treacherous *gwain* Caesar and was so duplicitous as to break every promise he ever made. A lying rogue who swore oaths he had no intention of honouring, and a swine who sets one brother against another, and worse! A two-faced, pitiless bastard who attacks and slaughters women and children for sport, and under an oath of truce!" Caswallawn swore passionately, the horror of known and recent events on the Batavian

Plain of Oss showing on his face and bringing all their thoughts back to the present.

"Hm, such a king would be lucky to see his next Samhain, when he would surely depart this world at the hands of an implacable druid, dressed no doubt in a matching leather kirt and cap for his hubris, with a handful of bitter mistletoe in his belly for his selfishness and a noose around his neck for his lack of judgement!" Lludd declared darkly, a twist to his lips.

"Ay, with his thick head removed shortly thereafter by the same bloody druid, and his impertinent carcass flung into a filthy bog!" Caswallawn finished the stark scene with a scowl, and their mood had darkened at this turn in the conversation.

"Better than the slashing and chopping madness of the brutal Iweriu though brother, as when they sacrifice their kings it is a foul and uncivilised event, and one which I fail to see inspiring any God to earthly assistance." Lludd scowled, and then shook his head at his own stark words.

"I didn't know that father." Afalach admitted wide eyed, rubbing his forearms.

"Ay, the Iweriuan kings symbolically *marry* the land they govern, and when that land fails, they are held culpable and are then simply butchered by their druids like the dogs of their enemies." Lludd informed them both and with a dour look on his angular face. "Their nipples too are torn to shreds at the start of those foul events, as strangely, during his life, an Iweriuan king will have his gŵyr suckle his nipples as an act of fealty and devotion." He shook his head at this and grimaced again, and the two brothers kissed iron, avoiding eye contact.

It was no surprise to Afalach that these two great men had fallen silent at this ominous but not uncommon scenario, as it was perhaps the blackest and best hidden fear of every Brythonic sovereign. "Did cousin Lleu take that broken blade with him to Gwened again Tad?" Afalach cleared his

throat, asking his father this casually, trying to lift this downward lurch in the mood.

Lludd shrugged his mouth in vague response. "Probably, you know what he and Llefelys are like about their traditions!" He rolled his eyes at his son, and Afalach chuckled at the memory of this old family custom.

"I suppose it helps in some small way, especially now to keep the bond between our two nations bright." He offered thoughtfully.

"Or maybe, the ceremonial bringing together of the two halves of Leir's broken old sword is just a damn good excuse to wear silly clothes and to get blind drunk!" Caswallawn broke in with arched eyebrows, and all three laughed again, as many a true word was said in jest. Finally, the obsidian, flint shadow of the druids which had encroached on their mood crawled back into its stygian depths, allowing their spirits to rise once more.

"Young Dylan remains to hold the council at CaerMelyn in King Lleu's absence." Afalach continued brightly, hoping to lift the mood further by naming his cousin and Lleu's young son, as Dylan ap Lleu was another of their beloved princely nephews.

"But Lleu took Gwydion his druid and his Pencampwr Amren ap Berth with him to Gwened, so I'm not sure of Dylan's remaining advisors." Lludd countered thoughtfully. "I do intend to visit him again as soon as I can, but all our business lies south for much of the near future, so he will have to rely on his own wits and those of his gŵyr and senior stewards to assist him. I would like to fly the flag up around northern Wenyllon and Tawescally again though brother, just to remind them of our last, less than friendly visit!" Lludd proposed, looking at Caswallawn across the table with his eyes twinkling. "Give the locals a little show of power again, just to give Dylan our support, and to dissuade any blackguards who may be plotting a coup in Lleu's absence." He added seriously, and Caswallawn nodded back lugubriously.

"Mm, I hadn't thought of that brother. It would be remiss of us to let such a thing happen in Lleu's absence, and yes, I would also like to take a little

friendly ride through Wenyllon and Tawescally again. Maybe an 'extra-large' hunting trip between Beltain and Lughnas?" He ventured with a smirk, the battle lights glinting momentarily in his eyes, and Lludd chortled in response.

"Maybe I could go?" Afalach offered gamely and with a generous face.

"Can you really spare the time son?" Lludd questioned him, only too aware of Afalach's list of mounting tasks and tightening deadlines, and his obligations to their other family members could neither be overlooked, and so they were all thus constrained. Afalach looked crestfallen as he had to admit the truth of the situation, especially his responsibilities to his young and royal wards. "Don't worry Afalach, I have already reached out to some very influential friends on this very subject, and so I'm sure Dylan will be well looked after." Lludd told them both cryptically and drained his spirit.

"Penarddun is growing fast tad, you should see her." Thus reminded, Afalach mentioned one of his royal wards, his young aunt and regal sister to both these kings.

"*Gwddw-gwyn* must be eleven now!" Caswallawn said in wonder, using the familiar name for their sister; Princess Penarddun 'white-throat', and he was amazed at how the time seemed to have evaporated, like water spilled on a hot hearthstone. Although only four summers old and a toddler at the time, their young sister had been deeply traumatised by witnessing their parent's violent death those seven years ago. She had been in the care of a distinguished nursing matron of the Essyllwyr and at Afalach's *CaerDolforwyn* ever since, and she had been making good progress of late.

"It's been a slow process, but Mag Heulwen seems to know what she's doing. It would be a damn sight easier without that unholy little terror Llŷr though!" Afalach told them with feeling, drawing knowing looks from the other two men around this table as they considered Afalach's other ward, the wildly rebellious and equally traumatised fourteen-year-old orphaned

monster: Princeling Llŷr *Lleddiarth* ap Baran. That boy's parents had perished bravely beside their own and in the infamous and tragic death of those giants of Prydain. The extended royal family had all been overcome by the king and queen's violent death including Llŷr's parents, brought about by stealth and treachery whilst campaigning in Italy, but obligations as to the boy's safety and future had been assumed by the family from the time of that disastrous event.

"I caught the little tyke putting a centipede in Penarddun's *siot* one morning and I lost my composure." Afalach admitted to them both and with a grim look.

"How so my son?" Lludd asked him with a grin, winking to his brother.

"I took a leather belt to his arse tad, until he was hopping and squealing like a gelded pig!" Afalach told them ruefully, but he could not help smiling as his mentors both roared with laughter.

"Something you should have done long ago my cu-nai!" Caswallawn laughed. "I would have beaten the stuttering little bastard black and blue years ago!" He declared jovially, and neither of his relatives doubted it for one moment, but Lludd put his hand on his son's arm demonstrably.

"Some children need to be reached out to Afalach, especially the wounded. If you don't, no matter how often or how hard you beat them, all you do is drive them into themselves, where inevitably they will fester and foment resentment. Before you know it, you will have a viper in your house and with death in its eyes for you!" Lludd said seriously, and both Caswallawn and Afalach looked at him gravely, nodding at his wisdom.

"That's exactly what I was saying brother!" Caswallawn retorted defensively, holding both hands up and with a wholly unconvincing, innocent look on his big face. "Reach out to the boy with both hands and....strangle the little bastard!" He made a throttling action, making them all laugh again.

In all their serious and busy lives, it was only on these increasingly rare occasions they spent together that they felt the liberty and ease to laugh freely, and all three clearly revelled in it.

“No but in all seriousness Afalach, make sure the little horror is monitored well, as if he really is interfering with Gwddw-gwyn’s recovery we will have to place him elsewhere!” Caswallawn considered seriously, and Afalach nodded half-heartedly.

“I have thought that too uncle, but I spoke to Penarddun, and she seems to be coping with his antics. For most of the time they’re good friends, so, I will take your advice and step up the vigilance. But I think I will keep them together for now, as there is no one else of her age in my caer and it might be counter-productive to remove Llŷr now.” He shrugged, seeming to come to the decision right there and looked pleased to have done so. “I will take your sage advice too tad and try to reach out to the boy when I get back, as I can’t just keep walloping him.”

“Take him hunting Afalach!” Lludd suggested. “Nothing silly, just a bit of tracking, a bit of rabbit archery and a couple of nights under the stars, you know some basic stuff.” He advised with raised eyebrows, and his big son shrugged his mouth and nodded in agreement.

“Sounds like a plan to me tad. I remember when you used to take me hunting!” He smiled, his eyes shining, and Lludd smiled with him, sharing those same treasured memories.

“Which reminds me!” Caswallawn interrupted them both, sitting up and fishing in a large inside pocket of his leather coat. He took out a beautiful, slim and artistically twisted silver torc of a stunning quality, one which had come into his possession only recently. He handed this treasure to Afalach with a casual air, but one which oddly seemed somewhat forced. “It’s for Penarddun’s dowry. I’ve been keeping it for her, but I don’t think I’ll be seeing her any time soon, so please give it to her at Beltain with my eternal love.” Caswallawn asked him as he handed it over, and Afalach wore a puzzled look as he hefted the slim but lovely torc in his hand.

Caswallawn grinned like a demon at his nephew.

“There’s no fooling you Afalach my boy! It’s not *Arian*, nor is it *Aur-Gwyn* as it looks, it’s made of *Platina*; a scarce and noble metal that comes from the high and frozen north. It’s fifty times rarer than gold, and that trinket could buy a hundred healthy slaves!” Caswallawn told them with wide eyes, and both men’s appreciation of this beautiful creation increased dramatically, making Lludd whistle. He and his son began to inspect this fabulous torc more closely, and they were clearly impressed by its intricate beauty, its deceptive weight and its staggering worth.

“I believe it is truly ancient. The Emeni made it of course at their CaerCenn, where, as you know labour the very finest Aerwyr, as no one in the known world can even approach their ancient artistry and skills with the noble metals!” Caswallawn told them both what they already knew as they examined this stunning circle of metalwork intensely. Caswallawn sat gazing at this torc’s intense and captivating beauty for long moments in his nephew’s hands and across these stained timbers, struggling to quash the strange but burgeoning feelings of loss growing within him, and he became fidgety, as if that treasure had some magnetic power or charm over him and had been difficult to part with. Afalach pocketed the fabulous piece of hugely valuable art without another thought, and the gleam in the southern king’s eyes dimmed, his face relaxing once more.

“Let us sleep on the problem of young Llŷr Lleddiarth gentlemen, and perhaps we can discuss it on our journey south in the morning!” Lludd proposed logically.

Afalach nodded wearily, and Caswallawn had to agree. The yawning southern king then caught the eye of a passing arwein, one of the few remaining at this late hour.

* * * * *

It was raining hard in southern Breged, and visibility had shortened noticeably this last hour. Lludd and his son had parted immediately on leaving Dinas Dinlle, and Afalach had headed south down the beautiful

coastal route along the western coastline through Ceredigion, and which lead eventually to southern Khumry and his own lands. Afalach's six capable guards had thundered off alongside him as they pursued the dying sun, leaving the two brothers and their guards to head east over the tortured mountain passes to Blaenau Ffestin where they rested, and then on to Bala the following day where they made another overnight camp near the ancient lakeside temple to Ceridwen and to her son Giôn. Their next stop was a lakeside camp at Llŷn Fyrnwy where they feasted on brown trout, and this was followed by a slog across the rough border ground and their south-eastern route into midland Lloegr.

Caswallawn and Lludd had talked for hours each day on the long, difficult journey at the head of their accompanying horsemen, mostly at how much the world had changed around them. The heartland and south midland tribes of this great country were becoming more pastoral and less hostile with each year that passed, and the cross-border raiding between them was almost a thing of the past now. Even the enduring glory of head hunting was fading, and these two Prydeinig legends were in a unique position to perceive these subtle changes over these years, and they discussed them at length as they travelled and made camp in a different but familiar territory each night. The manner in which their fabled father had wrested and held power over all Prydein was etched into these men's characters and into their souls, making imperative growth by any and all means a burning ambition within each. Their whole lives had been spent in the pursuit of power, and whilst Khumry's borders were ancient and considered inviolate, their discussions around those campfires had inevitably got around to the future position of Casufelawny and its infamously flexible boundaries. The name of Caswallawn's House meant 'kings of war' in the truly ancient Phoenician dialect brought here those eons ago, their *Cass* or *Cassi* titles having a similar meaning to Drac or Dracon to these men's forefathers, the latter title coming from Anatolia with the Albyne aristocracy almost two millennia later, but they meant the same thing; a war leader. Caswallawn was determined with his brother's help to prove that they were still exactly that; leaders of warfare.

Over the hard days on horseback, these two imposing leaders and warlords had found agreement on many disparate things, but now, as they gratefully approached the high and dark battlements of *CaerUricorn*; the midland capital of King *Iddel ap Madoc* of the House *Cornafau Calon*, their conversation had long died. Their weary riders were slumped in their saddles behind them, and all were soaked to the skin from the cold, incessant rain they had ridden through for many hours. They had pressed on hard today to make *Iddel's* great *caer* before sunset and this day's end, as *Iddel the Generous's* hospitality was legendary, but mostly because they and their horses were exhausted from the long journey southeast. Much of this riding had been done across roads and lanes which were ever difficult to negotiate, as if you were going against the grain of the land somehow or stroking a dog the wrong way. An uncommon easterly had also lent its exhausting weight to the toll of their journey, and they had fought the elements and terrain constantly. Luckily, these two famous lord's appearance at the head of this mounted group was enough to compel the gate master to yell for *arwein* and to quickly throw open a horse door in one of the huge gates. Over a score of tired horses plodded up the steep ramparts, their heads hanging along with their weary riders as they walked their tired horses up the broad and steep chariot ramp and through the tall hatch in the imposing gate of *Iddel's* huge *CaerUricorn*.

The royal brothers were led to a spacious *croeso hall* inside the main keep by a burly gatehouse steward, colourfully bedecked as it was in vibrant scraps of bunting for the impending festival, and where they took a comfortable seat to wait. It was a matter of moments before a tall and thin, domestic *arwein* entered and presented himself with two deep and respectful bows.

"Honoured King *Lludd ap Beli Mawr* and honoured King *Caswallawn ap Beli Mawr*, my name is *Befen*. This is a memorable occasion in my professional career my lords, and a great personal honour to meet such legendary heroes of *Prydein*!" The boy blushed as he remembered his duty with another deep bow to both men. "I offer you both the welcome of King

Iddel ap Madoc my Lords, and if you follow me please, I will show you to our guest lodges where you may both take rest and recuperation.” He proffered this in a cultured but boyish and musical voice, still blushing furiously. Both men grinned in response to Befen’s blushes, long used to the hero worship of Brythonic youth.

Befen the arwein had a long and serious face, and he informed them that he would be honoured to fetch whatever refreshments they desired, and that King Iddel would be informed immediately of their arrival. In fact, this professional and uniquely situated Paige was capable of delivering a great many services and pleasures in the execution of his duties. Lludd requested food and ale only, followed by six hours of privacy so he could sleep and recover. His brother did much the same, and they followed this tall and gangly servant along two long, stone-built passageways and under countless rows of tightly fitting, split spruce rafters overhead. Around another corner and Befen opened a door to a dry and pleasant room on the left with a roaring, shrouded hearth and a soft looking bed for Caswallawn, and the arwein bowed deeply at the doorway. Caswallawn made his farewells to Lludd in the passage, and they shook hands warmly as he was leaving early to complete his long return journey south alone.

“I will be back shortly majesty, with food and medd-melys.” Befen confirmed and bowed deeply again to Caswallawn, before turning and leading Lludd down a very similar corridor.

Caswallawn slumped to the bracken frame with a sigh of relief, as his legs, his buttocks and his back were aching with the seemingly endless hours of riding he had endured over the last few days, and battling the stinging elements on this last leg, bent over on a saddle all day long had felt like a lifetime. He was pleased regardless, pleased with the things he had been able to discuss and agree with Lludd during their onerous days of travelling and these tortuous hours of riding in the driving rain. As he prepared himself for bed, his thoughts for the future of Casufelawny returned and he smiled, as all was on schedule. He had subdued old King Anted’s Dobunny tribe to his west two years previously. Reducing them to

vassal status just through the threat of his military power had been easy, but Caswallawn was no fool, and his demands on the old king had been almost non-existent so far. So, Anted and his equally ancient and feeble gŵyr were content with their positions, as long as it guaranteed them the peace they needed to prosecute their businesses. However, unknown to them, Caswallawn had designs on a great bow of their fine and fertile land, one which bulged into Casufelawny's western border like an enormous beer belly. It had long irked him, and that huge and extremely valuable crescent of broad farmland which stretched the whole length of his western border had filled his thoughts of late. Caswallawn was determined that very soon, that big belly of land would be nourishing the people of Casufelawny and not the Dobunny. Atrebata to the south was proving more difficult as Commios had always been a thorn in his side, but since that rogue's enforced exile, Caswallawn had been making good inroads with his son Eppyll. Prince Eppyll now held the reins of Atrebata equally with his brother, and Caswallawn had struck up a relationship with that new and young noble, aided by his own son Tasgyofan who had known Eppyll as a child. However, Prince Eppyll's garrulous younger brother and their larger and more militarily organised warrior-class did not fear Caswallawn's might as the Dobunny did, but if he could by some means do more than bring them under his 'rheol y grym', Atrebata would be a huge and valuable asset. Atrebata also represented a steppingstone to the smaller and simply vanquished House of Rhegin below them to the south, another vital piece of the puzzle. Rhegin played a crucial part in his longer-term plan of regional ownership as it was flanked by the equally small and powerless kingdoms of Caint to the east and Belga to its west, which, if all were subdued would double the size of Casufelawny. Total conquest of all the minor tribes around him was Caswallawn's ultimate goal, and if somehow he managed to achieve it, he would rule all Lloegr. It would make his ruling kingdom of Casufelawny immensely powerful and wealthy at the centre of a unified Lloegr, but far more so in the future from its broad access to the oceans and its many ports. The eternally belligerent and war loving Ecani to Caswallawn's northeast were not even

worth considering yet, as they were virtually unconquerable at the moment in his opinion. He had thought that of Trinobanta once too, but that had changed last Autumn when he had slaughtered Dunfallawn. The triple-crown was far from being his legal possession yet, as the circumstances over the channel had drawn the beacon light of national and European interest across him and all his lands. This largely unwanted scrutiny illuminated his manoeuvres and effectively prevented him from capitalising on his recent gains with impunity, and so his opportunity of a territorial wide conquest of all Lloegr had passed, for now. Although it seemed that Trinobanta's throne may soon be restored by his own ambassador and the late Dunfallawn's absent son, Caswallawn possessed the upbringing to know that nothing was written in stone. Atrebata and Rhegin to the south, the other two jewels of his planned future triple-kingdom still lay as tantalisingly out of reach as Trinobanta, but he remained hopeful. Caswallawn burned with an uncomfortable, aggravating passion that drove him ever onwards, on toward his glittering goal, but with all that was in play nationally and all that lay just over the horizon, he had the knouse to put his plans of conquest on the back stone once more, as sometimes conquest could take a generation or more. Whilst some of his neighbours were content to soften into placid pastoralism, Caswallawn scorned their weakness as he still burned with the fire blood of his great father, and he would make them pay dearly for their descent into beardless timidity or he would die in the attempt. Imperative conquest had been what his tad, his taid and all his progenitors had lived for, and it was what he lived for; burned for. A vital concept he had been fully engaged in instilling into Tasgyofan for the last fifteen years, for as long as the boy could talk. The immutable truth; that security came from control through unassailable power, by ownership, conquest or vassal submission of your surrounding competitors. He knew it was not enough to just rise above them, as your competition needed to be crushed beneath you to affect a real victory, and Caswallawn hoped that Tasgyofan would eventually pass on this golden knowledge to his own

sons as he lay down on the soft bracken to await the food and the mead with another great sigh.

Befen threw open another door to a similar dry and comfortable chamber, and with another deep and formal bow he departed. Lludd had smiled at the boy as he had repeated the same promise to return soon with refreshments before turning on his heel and striding away on his long, thin legs.

Closing the stout door, Lludd left the bronze hook unlatched and eased his aching posterior onto the clean woollen floor rug, leaning back against the side of the big bed. He squeezed the large horsehair stuffed hessian bed cushion behind him with an appreciative nod, pleased too that the bracken under it, inside the supporting bedframe was fresh and springy and he looked forward to its comfort. Reclining against the soft side of the bulging mattress, he unbuckled the leather straps that secured his silver hand to the stump of his right forearm, and the relief was immediate. Placing this priceless prosthetic on the rug at his feet, Lludd massaged the aching and red-looking stump and its great crescent shaped wound which began to throb now it was free of the encumbrance. From an inside pocket, Lludd drew a small bronze pot of ointment with a tightly fitting lid, this he prised off with his teeth. Rubbing this vaguely greenish paste into the red flesh of his stump, he sent a fleeting prayer of thanks to his mentor HênDdu; the creator of this amazing and unctuous salve, which whilst smelled vaguely of swamp weed and frog spawn, it cooled the inflamed skin marvellously. Within a few minutes, this magical gel relieved all pain, but more importantly it dispelled all swelling and redness. He used it infrequently, as for a man with his training most pain was a simple matter to overcome, so he used the ointment for its astonishing ability to cause and support advanced physical repair to damaged flesh. His arm only protested after long hours of supporting the heavy silver burden and its leather cup and strapping, but the chaffing of many hours of recent hard riding was the main cause of this pain and inflammation tonight, but

within the hour it would all be gone without a trace from the druid's medicine.

Befen came and went, and Lludd wolfed down the excellent cold cuts, the beer and the fine warm bread the boy had brought him single handed. Once fed and watered, Lludd sat again on the floor and brought his feet together now, crossing his legs at the ankles and raising his knees, adopting the poise and the seated form of the Hunt-Lord; Arglwydd Cornonnyn Fawr. Focussing intensely on his form and with a sword-straight back, Lludd began to prepare for the ancient and regular, deep-breathing exercises of *Chwyth-Cornonnyn* which had been part of his astonishing training as a dewin, and he filled his great lungs now. Lludd exhaled powerfully, relaxing his body and his mind, imagining himself with a long-practised clarity in the form of the Lord Cornonnyn in all his elemental and natural glory. Lludd saw himself in a dappled forest clearing in his mind now, sitting cross-legged and with the crown of antlers on his own head. The sacred, ram-horned *Serpent of Ultimate Power* writhed in his outstretched left hand, and the *Torc of Ultimate Authority* glowed brightly in his ghostly right. He emptied his mind completely and consciously relaxed his shoulders, bringing his great focus to bear as he dominated the small pain in his limb, easily forcing it from his mind with his iron hard will. He began the second stage then of this elite martial art; 'The Breath of Cornonnyn', by breathing deeply and steadily to the most ancient of all human rhythms; his heartbeat. As a bovine reek of wild animals began to fill this chamber, Lludd gratefully entered the white zone of Cornonnyn through his dewin trained mind and as both his breathing and his heart slowed. Slowly but surely, his breathing and his heartbeat diminished to where they were barely discernible, and Lludd Llaw Ereint came to reside serenely in a place where there was no pain, no feeling and no thought. An hour spent in this pristine, healing and revitalising zone refreshed the body and mind like seven hours of undisturbed sleep, but it was mostly done by his elite warrior-priest colleagues before battle, or to recover quickly from sickness or injury.

Within the hour, the great, dark and brooding hilltop caer of Iddel was silent and both brothers were soundly asleep.



Chapter Nine.

CaerCamelon was in uproar, and stewards, servants and slaves alike were still bustling about this great capital fortress in last-minute preparation for today's momentous occasion and the feast planned for later this evening. Lord Androgeus of the 'Order of Llysgennau' had arrived at King Ederus' caer the previous evening along with his large retinue of honourable diplomats. Following a good night's sleep, he was due to speak to the assembled royalty and gŵyrd of Galedon this fresh spring morning. In response to this, it seems as if every village, town and fortress in the region had emptied its homesteads, taverns and barracks to flood this caer along with the outlying tref and its lively port at the mouth of the nearby Gwidan.

Miles away and high above the surrounding trees, the encircling mountains were still draped with snow this bright morning, and Camelon's stock herds remained in their pens as Beltain was still many days away. Hundreds of royals and noblemen were drawn together for this historic event today and in this cold but fresh, springtime air. kings, princes, great and infamous gŵyr, other nobles and the wealthy, landed tumon of Galedon were all here assembled in this great capital caer. Before the granite blockwork of this huge fortress' inner keep, the ubiquitous cabal of white robed druids was arrayed around the back of this temporary outdoor dais, upon which the ancient marble throne of ArdFergus Fawr now stood square. It supported the broad figure of that legendary high king's descendant this bright but blustery morning, and it was the great King Ederus of Galedon who sat forward in deep thought upon it with crown a-tilt, one elbow on his knee and bearded chin in hand. The Honourable Princess Eirwen sat upright on her *orsedd isaf* to Ederus' left, and many longing eyes in this huge crowd secretly coveted this beautiful maiden. She looked a vision of stunning elegance this morning, and her long and

flaming auburn tresses flowed like hot liquid copper-bronze over the snowy winter mink of her stole. Polished diamonds glittered at each ear, and the fabulous and twisted gold torc of a princess shone around her slender neck, but Eirwen had not smiled once this morning. She remained cool, detached and aloof throughout this period of waiting, and with just a hint of sadness showing at the corners of her lovely eyes. Lydia stood to her left hand, ready to respond to any whim of her mistress, whilst a pristine and ritually dressed guard stood close to her right with polished mail and a mirrored, ceremonial helm and spear for his duty as Eirwen was unwed still. Her *real* guardian lay curled around her feet however, warming them beautifully. Bledri her enormous war hound was Eirwen's constant companion, and he yawned hugely as her fingers caressed his right ear, showing the sharp and gleaming rows of white teeth in his cavernous mouth. Bledri was one of the huge and powerful wardogs Galedon bred for battle from a distant ancestor, and one who had arrived long ago from the frozen, mountainous regions of central Anatolia, brought here by their warlike Hittite ancestors for that very purpose. Two of these awesome dogs, working in tandem could bring down a fully grown stag and literally tear it in half. They were enormous, incredibly muscular beasts, and they possessed a phenomenal bite that could crush a spear shaft to splinters with ease. Their shaggy coats were always cropped close for battle and kept short for most of their normal military lives, but Bledri was very different. Utterly fearless and uniquely bred for war, these dogs once fully trained were a fearsome and terrifying weapon, but Eirwen had taken this puppy at six weeks from its mother's teats four years ago, and they had been almost inseparable since that moment. Bledri's long and shaggy coat had never seen a pair of shears, and so he looked very different to any other wardog in Galedon or Prydein. Known to all, the huge hound was utterly devoted to Eirwen and was constantly at her heel or galloping alongside Tringad's thundering hooves, his pink tongue hanging and his curly ears flopping joyously.

Shifting on her seat, Eirwen watched laconically as this multitude still poured up the ramp and into her father's caer, which had been entirely

foreseen by him and all his advisors, and as hospitality is everything in Prydein, much had been prepared to this end. Huge firepits had been dug in a downwind plot adjacent to the well, and she could see the rows of piglets rotating slowly on those long dog-irons and each tended by a line of sweaty stewards armed with basting ladles. Those roasting hogs gave off clouds of savoury aromas she could smell from here, and they dripped their greasy juices to the blazing coals below them with loud and steaming hisses that she could not quite hear, but it was enough to make her mouth water. The bakery across from this huge private courtyard had been working all the hours of the day and for three whole days and nights just to offer some sustenance to all these people. There were also their werrin in the tref across the bend in the afon Carryn below to feed and to water, not forgetting the huge numbers of visiting nobles inside this caer. Eirwen could see that pockets of new arrivals were still emerging through the great open gates in the distance. They came from the surrounding forests behind this great promontory bow in the river, as in family groups they walked down that intricate web of ancient and snowy lanes she knew so well, all leading to the huge and long-cleared plain of fro Camelon and its sweeping cattle stockades. The tussocked grass of that maes, spread before the jagged heights of this hilltop caer on its riverine headland was criss-crossed with footpaths, and those lanes which all led to the broad gravel driveway facing the twin gate towers of CaerCamelon and their fluttering banners were busy this day. Behind the rear palisades and this stone keep behind her, terraced rows of deep ditches ran sheer down to a huge bow in the beautiful river Carryn below and which faced the town on its opposite bank, securing all three water bound, rear aspects of her father's fearsome tribal citadel. The northern courtyard over to her right had been completely bedecked with long trestle tables today to accommodate the provisions for these gathering aristocrats, and all were draped in clean linen and canopied under long sheets of waxed canvas. These canopies were suspended and held in place by long poles, all fixed in a long line to the battlement walls of that quadrant, and in their shade,

the nobility of Galedon picked their fancy from the tables under them, all of which groaned from the weight of food piled upon them.

Ederus sat on a silk cushion which softened and warmed the cold marble of his throne, and which had been carried outside to the main quadrangle by his stewards. Upon it, he now sat facing his House totem, tall and immovable in the centre of the huge, rectangular space at the heart of his caer, now thronged with his garrulous subjects. Ederus wore his fir-green and gold mantle this morning as although no rain was likely, it was cold again and he was glad of it. It was pinned above his left breast with the magnificent golden brooch of state with its prancing stag, and the eyes of all who passed his throne with a bow were drawn inexorably to its breathtaking, glittering beauty for just one lingering moment. Most of his princes and the *Gŵyrd y Gogledd* were assembled on the vast, interior ground before him, and dozens of carpenters had been busy all week forming the three-tiered seating around this space needed for the huge numbers expected, and many hundreds were still consigned to standing around the tall and rearing stag statue that dominated the centre of his enclosure. Ederus' state totem had been sculpted anonymously long ago from a rare black granite, and it towered above them all. That beautifully carved but age worn king stag stood high above everyone on its hindlegs, rearing up from its footing on that tall stone pedestal. The octagonal plinth under it looked truly ancient too, and it was deeply carved on each face with the now barely legible runes of the ancestors and the flowing, circular and interlinked designs that have endured for so many generations. Its huge, leonine mane stood proud about its muscular shoulders, and the beast had one foreleg raised, which had clearly been broken off at some point in its long history and then reaffixed with a dark cement many years ago. A few of the points in its magnificent crown of antlers were missing, but this took nothing from its colossal beauty, it added rather a measure of honest character to its form and bestowed the nobility of antiquity to its rugged features. A few tell-tale scraps of gold foil still adhered to the more sheltered parts of this monstrous black stag, a testament to its previous and stunning glory. A continual hubbub of

excitement came from the huge crowd under it, and Ederus ran his eyes over these fashionably and expensively dressed lords and ladies in their finery, and as they conversed with each other in great knots of men and women in this vast interior, he smiled to himself. A circle of the beautifully dressed, unmarried young women of his caer sat on the ring of benches around the octagonal stone base of that statue, as they did at each of the four main holy festivals of the year. With Beltain almost upon them and with this historic occasion today, the girls wore their very finest clothing and jewellery, and concentric rings of earnest young men competed subtly but terribly to attend their every whim. In each event trysts were made, and young hearts were either thrilled or broken.

The sun finally broke free of a cloud's clinging embrace, and it flooded this caer with shafts of enervating sunlight and colour, just as Erran turned up with a jug of hot mead and his favourite auroch horn cup, and Ederus winked at the boy in thanks. As the high king of Galedon sipped his delicious and honeyed mead which steamed pleasingly in this cold air, a *cornwr* sounded assembly suddenly from the battlements. In response to this blast, a long retinue of robed ambassadors followed by their clerks and priests appeared then from around the corner of the guest lodges and with the tall and imperious figure of Lord Androgeus at its head. The assembled princes, lords and Ederus' gŵyrd unknotted themselves and the crowd before Ederus parted like an axe-split log, making an avenue for this noble delegation and the tall man leading it.

A hushed silence descended on this congregation now and as these thirteen elegant men walked sedately down the long and undulating space vacated by the great and good here assembled. The competing young men dissolved into the crowd, and the young ladies departed the ring of benches in flitting clouds of colourful silk and lace. Ederus' mood lifted at the approach of this famous and long-awaited ambassadorial delegation, and he sat up in the throne, straightening his crown.

Lord Androgeus led his entourage around the state stag of Galedon, his eyes rising to appreciate its ancient beauty for a brief moment, before

returning his gaze to the dais ahead and the huge figure of great King Ederus on the legendary marble throne awaiting his presence. He came to within nine feet of the great throne and stopped at the mark on the ground, a distance of three reeds and no more. This mark was made as always by the white ceremonial rod of ash, six feet long and capped both ends with sculpted silver, twice the length of the ancient, *wielded* type. Known throughout this land as the *llath y gallu gwyn*; the 'white rod of power', it was deeply carved with the runes and swirling designs of ancient legitimacy. Still in use in Iweriu by their sovereigns and once carried by the Brythonic kings of old, these white rods were a symbol of their authority. Now in Prydein however, a longer version was fastened to the ground by two 'U' shaped pins of decorated silver and at the precisely measured distance. The *parth y brenin*, or sacred 'king's zone' this rod on the ground delineated is an ancient royal safety measure known throughout Prydein and Gallia, and regardless of accident, to cross its mark without invitation promised a swift and violent death in times of crisis or war. A finely dressed warrior in the gleaming mail and the blood red cloak of Galedon's honour guards stood to one side to enforce the *parth y brenin* boundary, and with a beautifully polished war spear if absolutely necessary. His fabulous, mirrored helmet was dazzling in the sunshine, and the long, leaf shaped blade of his spear had also been extravagantly tinned, making them gleam like a mirror. Although it was clearly a ceremonial weapon, the unspoken threat remained.

Lord Androgeus' diplomats fanned out behind him then in support. The bards with their coelbren sticks and their tiny axes, and the handful of clerks who scribbled every official word spoken by him on their waxed tablets in Greek all fell away to the sides. This deputation of serious looking men who were left, most of whom came from the renowned House of the Cornafau Calon were famous, as they were considered the very best mediators in all Prydein and beyond. These proud men were dressed in the same long, dark blue gowns of pleated linen and matching caps of the honourable Order of Llysgennau, and who all stood upright and forthright now behind their leader and before this infamous northern king.

Ederus smiled in welcome and recognition of the blue-blooded lord ambassador ahead of his professional colleagues, who all followed Androgeus' lead and bowed deeply before him. These diplomats too filed away then, leaving Lord Androgeus alone in his dark blue, pleated gown which fell to his ankles, and his cap gleamed with a band of gold braid, declaring his position.

Lord Androgeus, Brif-Llysgennad of Prydein stood tall and proud before the king of all Galedon, his most beautiful and regal daughter, his priests and his nobles in this sharp and cold highland air with his breath pluming. This regal ambassador looked the king directly in the eyes before taking a deep breath. His chin came up then and he took another, measured step toward Ederus, stepping over the sacred white boundary rod on the ground and into the forbidden *parth y brenin*, causing a low murmuring to issue from the massed crowd behind him. Androgeus was indicating his right to do so, as although he was not yet a king, his royal blood and unchallenged lineage allowed him the ancient recognition of *ris y rhi*, the right to take this further; 'step of a king'. The fabulous *parth y brenin* guard made a quarter turn to his right, and half-presented his glittering *saffwy-defod* toward Androgeus in the expected age-old procedure, and more excited whispers flitted about this mass of mesmerised onlookers at this pageantry. All here knew that this tall, noble and intelligent looking man was not only Lord Androgeus of world repute but knew too that this same man was in line to wear the ancient, triple-crown of Trinobanta and to assume its vacated throne. The spearman to this nobleman's right was also keenly aware of the identity of his charge, as is right and proper for the keeper of the *parth y brenin* to know. So, the warrior remained in this half-cocked stance as Lord Androgeus bowed once more to Ederus from inside this prohibited zone, who stood and bowed deeply in return, acknowledging Androgeus' royal right to the *ris y rhi*. Ederus then held out his right arm in invitation for Androgeus to step onto the dais, and there the two men embraced warmly. Loud applause erupted from the crowd, and both great men were smiling as Ederus presented his esteemed visitor to the clapping and cheering mass of his people. Leading the

ambassador by the arm in due deference across the dais, Ederus was symbolically helping him to the *llwyfan areithiwr* which awaited him to one side of this platform. A leather and limewood war shield bearing the proud, rearing stag cygil of Galedon was mounted to the front of this large and sturdy 'podium' of wax polished wood, and Lord Androgeus paused at the bottom step.

His heart was beating hard, and his breathing had quickened as he stopped just short of this tall timber stand. Taking a few deep breaths to calm himself, Androgeus bowed deeply to King Ederus again before turning and bowing just as deeply to all the royal and noble spectators assembled before him. Straightening, he studied this vast crowd in their finery, taking a moment to appraise this multitude of combrogi assembled here to hear him speak, and he was proud, savouring each moment of possibly the last of his beloved diplomatic missions. With a brief nod to his subordinate diplomats, Androgeus adopted a serious expression and turned to his duty. His gowned assistants, now standing to either side of the dais watched as Androgeus climbed the three wooden steps to the top platform, where he looked around again at this huge congregation, which was packed like mackerel prey within the walls of this enormous caer. The leading diplomat in all Prydein and Gallia cleared his throat then, before beginning the speech he had been practicing and improving for all the challenging days it had taken to reach this great northern caer from his offices in Aremorica. Lifting his chin as his bards locked their coelbren sticks into their awaiting peithenyn frames and stood poised with their tiny coelbren axes, and the clerks in the wings stood poised with their waxed tablets, each with a sharp stylus at the ready, he adopted the familiar pose of the orator, placing his right hand on the cold, polished bronze handrail before him and the other he rested on his left hip.

"King Ederus ap Ewin ap Ewin ap Durstus Fawr. August, regal and honoured assembly, I address you in the name of King Caswallawn Fawr ap Beli Mawr of the Southern Brythons, but also in what is vital and most pressing for the lives and welfare of all your loyal subjects." He opened

loudly and in the stentorian voice he had become so famous for, pausing here to draw breath and to relax as the professional in him took over and warmed to the task at hand. The location of the dais and this podium had been well chosen by Ederus, clearly from experience as with the rear three sides surrounded by stonework, his voice was amplified and carried forward over the crowd before the dais, past the great stag and on to the furthest listeners, seated in rows on the wooden benches against those far battlements flanking the enormous gates. Androgeus took a deep breath and pressed on.

“As nature, the wife lover of all living things has disposed this sacred Isle to be inhabited by the five valiant kingdoms of Prydein and the princedoms that reside within each, it is not proper that we should live in division and hatred like irrational beasts destroying one another, but rather be united in such entire friendship and amity, that we be able to resist all foreign enemies if they happen to invade either one!” He completed his logical and entirely rational opening statement, his powerful and sonorous voice booming out to all that were gathered here to hear him speak, and the distant barking of a dog made the silence in the pause even more profound. A log of potable water was placed handily on the internal shelf of this podium, and Androgeus took a quick drink as his mouth was dry, but he continued strongly, his left hand rising now and with an accusing forefinger pointing south. “The Romans, who are declared enemy to all kings threaten to destroy the Southern Brythons, then what hopes of mercy can you have from such powerful enemies when you see your neighbours destroyed so cruelly?” He challenged them all here, and there were many shaking heads in this vast crowd before him, clearly unmoved by the great distances involved. “The Romans call themselves the lords of all the world and are now preparing to invade sacred Prydein herself and to subdue the southern Brythons, and should they succeed will also no doubt move north to invade Breged, Albion and even high Galedon, as the treacherous wolf of Rome’s ambitions are unbound. He will deprive us all of our laws and liberty and he will take possession of all our lands, our caers and our trefs, and subject us to such

shameful servitudes, as he has done to several powerful nations already!" He paused again here, as a hubbub of agreement arose from this huge assembly now and from the nobility on this dais below him. "Nor in all truth, can we expect any more favour or mercy than our combrogi the Galliad and other nations who have been so wrongfully subdued by them have received!" He added strongly, sweeping his gaze across them all. "Therefore, proud Brythonic *cenedl* of Prydain, let us join together to resist the common enemy and hazard our lives in battle in hopes of victory, which if we obtain by the favour of our Gods, we shall not only purchase our liberty but likewise immortal praise and honour, to ourselves, our posterity and our bri forever may the Gods allow!" He finished with the expected plea, and this massed audience of listeners responded in turn.

"May the Gods allow!" The ground shook with this thunderous reply, and Androgeus nodded at the response, looking exhausted but gratified.

Ederus had long discussed this issue with his gŵyrd, and many hard decisions had already been made, but this official procedure must be met regardless, and so he rose now from his marble throne to face his collective people and to deliver his considered response. He bowed to Androgeus, who climbed down the steps and bowed deeply in return. Ederus shook his hand warmly, before mounting the familiar steps of his own podium. Androgeus took his seat among the gentry, feeling the tension build in all these people around him.

The king of Galedon looked astounding at that height, and Ederus' bulk and his broad shoulders drew the eye inexorably, as did the fabulous brooch and the stunning old gold antler crown of Galedon, set above the long nose and his big, rugged face. The steely eyes of King Ederus in all his glory, and who now stood before his subjects glittered with pride. Ederus' chest swelled, and his square, bearded chin jutted as he looked around at the fascinated, well-known faces of his people, and he nodded his big and noble head as if pleased by what he saw.

"Honourable Lord Androgeus, come in the name of King Caswallawn ap Beli Mawr of the Southern Brythons." He began in his deep baritone, his

breath billowing into the cold air. He made a modest pause here so that his vassal princes, gŵyr and nobles would note the omission of the word *Fawr*. Whilst the Southern Brythons may call him such, the title had not been nationally ratified and considered an 'affectation' by most northerners, so he sidestepped it as tactfully as he could whilst still making the point with the obvious omission. Looking down his prominent nose at this massed crowd of people for a moment, he pressed on, looking back then at an unflustered Androgeus.

"What you desire for our well-beloved neighbours Lord Androgeus, being honourable and advantage to our own common interest we desire for ourselves, as is right, and so we are resolved to join you in the defence of our realms, which have been so valiantly protected by our honoured progenitors from the many threatened attempts and from all dread enemy past. As the circumstances of our combrogi across the water and our ancient friends in Gallia, Batavia, Iberia and many other subdued nations are well known to us, they may also sufficiently testify as to the intolerable miseries of those that have submitted to the savage yoke of the Roman Empire. My opinion is, it would have been more honourable for them to have died valiantly in the defence of their liberty than to live in such shameful slavery!" Ederus' proud voice boomed around these walls, and the disdain was clear at his own caustic words. The hubbub rose again in response, but Ederus held up his hand and the silence was immediate. "Whilst we ourselves are in no imminent danger from the Romans should the southern tribes resist their power. Yet, if we may consider that the southern Brythons be subdued, the Romans will undoubtedly invade each of our kingdoms in turn. This takes no great reasoning, and if they should overcome us all one at a time, as all things are possible in war?" He paused again here, looking around at the faces of his people and as this shocking question stunned them into a horrified stillness. It hung in the cold air above them like the ancient sword of Damocles, and you could have heard a hairpin fall to the grass. Ederus nodded seriously in the shocked vacuum of silence which followed this grave enquiry. "Then we may expect to be reduced to mean servitude, or

entirely expelled from our blessed kingdoms of Prydein!” He added this forcibly, his face becoming ferocious at his own words. There was a low roar of resistance to this unthinkable consequence, and Ederus counted slowly to nine..., allowing their emotions to well-up..., as he knew they would... before he held his hand up again for order. “Therefore..., therefore Lord Androgeus, as your King Caswallawn’s southern Brythons are resolved to fight against the Romans in the just defence of his kingdoms and your liberty, we are also resolved to hazard our lives and stand with you, and rather die valiantly in battle if it so please our Gods than see our beloved neighbours the southern Brythons destroyed, our country invaded and our people subdued or banished, whereby our wives, our children and our chattels may become prey to such merciless enemy.” Ederus snarled resentfully here and with a savage twist to his mouth, and there was a horrified murmuring among the civilian women in the audience at these words, but then a silence fell on them again as the crushing weight of this appalling outlook fell on them all. Ederus stood straight and his chin came back out then, defiance blazing from his eyes as he gripped the handrail with both hands, his warrior’s face filling now with blood. Leaning forward he raised his deep voice, and he raised too his right fist.

“This I will not let happen, for I shall raise my army!” He roared, spittle flying from his bared teeth, and all eyes were drawn to his terrible, emerging warface. “I shall with all haste Lord Androgeus raise my host and move to expedition, and we shall send ourselves south to join Caswallawn your proud king at the pre-determined location. We shall at that place welcome this foreign trespasser, together!” Ederus declared hotly and loudly, raising his right fist again and now pointing south with his left. He was forced to pause there, as the sound from the crowd at this declaration of war would have drowned out his words.

Ederus rubbed his intertwined fingers together absently for warmth and waited, once again counting to nine with his eyes glittering. Order was soon restored by the calming gestures and soothing entreaties of the

twelve blue gowned diplomats, and Ederus continued strongly in the silence they had created. "You shall entreat good King Cridas of Albion on your way back south Lord Androgeus at the sacred triple-hills of DunEil and ask too that he raise his army and join us in this righteous undertaking." Ederus charged Androgeus with a nod. "And I shall also send birds and emissaries there in support of our endeavours and further southward too, to entreat my friend and ally King Bellnor of the Bregantau for him to join with us in accord with our declared articles of alliance, and we shall have our blessed triad!" He declared gruffly. "As I find my people of Galedon unanimously inclined to comply with my desire, I make no doubt of their valour and that with the assistance of our Gods we shall obtain victory in the just defence of our country, and together we shall repel the wolf of Rome. The Galedonau go to war may the Gods allow!" He roared at them; his face flushed with the blood of his deadly promise.

"May the Gods allow!" Was bellowed back in a deafening unison, and the ground shook as Galedon declared war on Rome. Birds took to the air in fright, and dogs barked as pandemonium ensued across this towering and fortified riverine isthmus.

* * * * *

Cadwy had built the bower himself, on a ridge with a fine view and at the edge of this woodland copse. He had formed it from the living branches of a suitably grown juniper bush, and he had woven laths of sacred hazel into this cocoon like enclosure for two. Broad leaves, laid in interlapping layers on the top and secured with twine would keep any rain out, as it had rained constantly for the last three days in Selgofa, but Bel had smiled down on his own festival of honour this morning. The persistent rain had relented, being replaced by a bright but blustery day and which so far had stayed dry. Spring had welcomed this new year profusely, with dog violets blooming in the sheltered, sacred groves and accompanied as always by the careful, warbling song of a local missel-thrush, a unique songbird whose powerful call carries through even the stiffest of winds. Sacred hazels everywhere were hanging now with new lamb's tails, and

the sharp red spearpoints of the awaking chestnut trees had long thrust forth in seasonal celebration. Competing brigades of young frogs croaked to each other across the heavily reeded marshlands to the north of the three hills, and which towered almost centrally over this long cleared and huge plain of Rhosmêl. All around this land was awakening from the long, icy grip of winter as new life sprang forth with an irresistible abandon across northern Prydein. This welcome new growth was more vibrant along both fecund banks of the afon Twaïd which flows through this verdant valley, running through the heart of Rhosmêl and onwards, ten miles further east to Cridas' nearby minor fortress of CaerCalchfyn. That white, limewashed and high palisaded dun controls the bridges over the confluence of the Twaïd and the Gribo before they both then run east to the coast, where lies the thriving Fotadina seaport of *Barlyswr ar Twaïd*. This whole mountainous, north-eastern region of Albion had slowly emerged from winter death in these recent days, and it was now moving gratefully and gracefully into spring and into the warmer seasons of life. The thousands of stock animals belonging to these local communities had braved the cold waters of the Twaïd before running Bel's fiery gauntlet earlier today, and they were now all secure, both spiritually and physically in their huge timber pens. Tomorrow the real work would begin for the stockmen, for all the beasts had to be driven to the high pastures for the coming summer, but the Albionau thronging Rhosmêl looked to entertain themselves tonight now that the hard work was done, for this day at least.

Cadwy had laid a thick bed of soft spring bracken in this bower for a seat before draping a horse blanket over it and a sheet of fine linen over that. It looked vaguely like a green and purple coracle set on its side, festooned with clusters of juniper fruit, all of which gave off a pleasant aroma, and he had spent the last hour threading blooms of wild primrose, deeply cerulean bluebells and bunches of dazzling white, purple, and blue wood anemones between the purple berries and into the vital walls of this secret and very private retreat. It was situated on a ridge, high above a mud swamped bank of a trout stream in flood and which flows into the Twaïd about two hundred reeds away, but this less than salubrious aspect

was directly below and unseen from this bower. It was a well-chosen spot however, as the eye-catching view through the trees and from this high floral cocoon encompassed the torch lit tref and most of Rhosmêl, glowing in festivity seventy reeds in the distance. Between the few tall trunks ahead and from the comfort of this silk lined bower, Cadwy could see that long rows of lit torches had been spiked into the turf of Rhosmêl and which delineated the avenues leading to and from the town, snaking up to the dark and brooding heights of the sacred triple hills of DunEil in the background. Many folk could be seen walking happily up and down these broad, torch lined avenues under the stars of Beltain, and the huge but distant balefire was clearly in view, making his *Beltain Bower* the most perfect and secluded spot for a tryst of the heart. He stood back to judge his efforts, and it pleased him that the wild celandines competed gamely with the primroses with alternate bursts of sunshine and butter yellow among the dark berries, and he smiled. 'What girl on Earth could remain unimpressed at such a wondrous creation borne of love?' Cadwy thought to himself, leaving aside the feelings of smouldering passion, uncertainty, anxiety and hope which assailed him constantly of late. Overlooking too the ubiquitous and nightly, auburn and emerald dreams that had compelled him to this careless endeavour. Cadwy had not seen her yet, but Hefin had, so he knew that the preeminent princess of the Galedonau had come to DunEil's famed festivities and in the company of his great aunt. His spies' reports had proved accurate, and he had felt a thrill of excitement at the news of Princess Eirwen of Galedon's arrival. There had been that feeling in his chest again and the tremor in his stomach as his mind spoke her glorious name, and anticipation had gripped him like a fever. This enervating feeling still buzzed around his body and mind, and he looked at his ally and co-conspirator approaching from the ancient pathway behind this bower he had fashioned with hope in his heart and with her name ringing in his head. Hefin was bringing him the picnic hamper he had asked and paid for, but he wore a vaguely starstruck expression on his broad face that was totally uncommon, and although when questioned Hefin denied such a thing was possible, but he looked

Cadwy square in the eyes then and said to him quietly; “You haven’t seen her yet!” His eyes were wide, and this caused an unfamiliar surge of panic at Hefin’s words, and yet Cadwy had no idea why.

“Why? What do you mean? What’s wrong with her? Who’s she with?” He snapped at Hefin as he put the wicker basket down, a strange look on his young face. Hefin doubled up in convulsions of laughter then at his terrified expression, but Cadwy was incensed at this, and he scowled at Hefin in the most furious way he could muster. Hefin caught his eye again and fell to the ground alongside the hamper, choking now with more hoots of painful laughter from the dead leaves.

“No, you great purple-headed Cal!” Hefin spluttered from the deadfall, still slapping his thighs in mirth and gurgling like a strangled chicken at Cadwy’s stricken face. Cadwy adopted a regal air of indignant displeasure at his insolence and just glared down at him.

“I am not a great, purple-headed cock you blithering oaf, I’m your crown prince, and your very life rests in my hands!” He declared, theatrically closing a finely gloved right fist in front of Hefin, but with a feigned pomposity he could not maintain for all his life. He could not keep a straight face, making him chortle, and leaning forward he offered a hand to his battle driver who was also grinning broadly now, his laughter suppressed.

“Come on, out with it!” Cadwy prompted him deadpan.

“She’s alone of course, apart from a pretty young chaperone. Ioddo has been dispatched to deal with her, obviously.” Hefin rolled his eyes.

Cadwy laughed at this, shaking his head but smiling still.

“Well, you show me a girl who doesn’t go weak at the knees in his company, the flash bastard. Anyway, with golden boy on the case your way should be clear my prince!” Hefin gave him a lascivious wink from the ground, but Cadwy ignored it and kept his hand out.

“What did she look like?” He asked him, keeping his expression neutral, and Hefin’s in response became serious.

“If you manage to claim the hand of that girl Cadwy Fawr, you will be the envy of every man with a pulse in the known world!” Hefin answered him from the leaf litter, finally grasping the outstretched forearm.

As his cousin, lord and prince restored him, Hefin started dusting himself down.

“Tonight my prince, the honourable Princess Eirwen ferch Ederus of Galedon is like Arianrrhod herself come to earth in all her majesty, and even the stars are put to shame by her dazzling and unmatched splendour!” He eulogised in his lilting tenor, standing straighter now and adopting the familiar pose of the orator, his favourite pose. “Flowers spring joyously from each fleeting and blessed footstep, and the earth itself mourns her passing. A glorious radiance emanates from her ethereal magnificence!” Hefin, ever the poet declared flamboyantly, warming now to his favoured pastime and throwing his arms wide. “She is a shining, diamantine-studded Goddess, who has deigned to come amongst the drab werrin....”

“Cut the cow-shit Hefin ap Brynig and tell me what she bloody well looks like!” Cadwy interrupted him with a growl, mercilessly and deadpan, but Hefin ignored him completely.

“So that we may all gawp and gaze in awe at her exquisite elegance and her bewitching beauty!” He finished, grinning and nodding his head in support of his verbal artistry, but Hefin suddenly took a step closer and gripped Cadwy by the shoulders. A serious look returned to his broad young face with its sparse blond facial hair which stubbornly refused to grow, to their hirsute friend Bleddyn’s eternal amusement, he who had looked like a wolf-born boy from the age of fourteen.

Hefin always carried a few extra pounds and had been *stocky* since his painful birth, but it belied his athleticism, and this earnest young prince was not one to be underestimated. He locked eyes with Cadwy now, still

gripping his muscular shoulders and he began again seriously. "This is no cow-shit my prince! You must be as brave as the great Baedd of Albion Prince Cadwy ap Cridas of the House Selgofa, and you must seize your opportunity!" He stated, honouring the great boar of their nation and honouring too his prince with full title. He showed his warface then, and Cadwy's eyes grew at this unexpected demonstration, but he held his tongue, as his dear friend and combrogi's eccentricities had always been endearing, and he appreciated the gesture as Hefin tried to stir him to action. "You must be a warrior of romance this evening my prince! The Tywysog of this sacred bower, and you must perform the sweet battle tactics of love like a warrior-prince, with not one thought of defeat or surrender. You will tonight Cadwy Fawr win the good lady Eirwen's hand and her heart forever!" Hefin charged him theatrically, squeezing his shoulders and making Cadwy smile again.

"Now who's being a steaming great cal?" Cadwy asked him playfully, still laughing at Hefin's serious face as they parted.

"Ay my prince t'is true, I do possess a steaming great Cal!" Hefin admitted with equal seriousness, stepping away from him, but with a familiar glint to his eye. "As many a fair maiden, in many a tref in Albion could attest!" He added confidently and with a casual wave of his hand. "What can I say, it's a gift from Lug himself!" Hefin concluded with a shrug and a broad smile, making Cadwy chuckle, but at which point Hefin inserted a little finger into the crook of the opposite thumb and wriggled it at Cadwy offensively. "Not like your princely little worm of a cock!" He demonstrated lewdly, but instantly jumped away as Cadwy would have grabbed him and thumped him for sure. Cadwy pursued him half-heartedly for a few steps before coming to a rueful halt, shaking his head. "I shall meet you at the appointed place with present location and all the latest intelligences great prince!" Hefin called over his shoulder cheerfully as he trotted toward the sprawl of thatches around the distant dun, bejewelled now by the rows and rows of bunting and the many hundreds of burning torches.

The streets ahead were crowded with the joyous celebrants of this year's sacred festival, and Cadwy ambled towards it in Hefin's footsteps, looking toward Tref Eil and the busy open plain around it in a daze, his mind zooming up to the stars. The druids were on their third hill, feasting and celebrating this holy day with their bards, the uati and their invited guests, but Beltain was ever a festival of the home and hearth. In the villages and the trefs, every thatch and outhouse in the land was bedecked in bunting this day, mostly made from scraps of cast-off material, but the multitude of colours and patterns were pleasing to the eye and added to the festival atmosphere. These festivities were blessed with the ancient songs to Bel and Sulis and were sung joyously by the many children of this huge community and led in flocks around the tref by a druid or druiden, where they entertained the werrin with their sacred englyns and prayers to the great God of fire and growth. This is always done to much applause and generous reward at each household enclosure, and a large and noisily enthusiastic phalanx of these local children clutching their yellow Bel pennants swept past Cadwy now, led by this year's young druiden acolyte. Cadwy followed the chattering sun flag gang absently along this lane, and as the babble of these children's excited voices faded, the sights and the mouth-watering smells of this fayre began to caress his senses, lifting his spirits immeasurably. He felt the knots of tension leaving his shoulders and his neck, which still got a little stiff from his hunting incident, even now. There was a sweet, floral spirit in the air tonight, mixing with the savoury aromas of roasting meat, the ubiquitous smells of beer and smoke, the musty *whiffs* of people and their clothing and a few other, less attractive odours. He smiled at the memories these complex and nostalgic but obvious scents of a festival brought back, and as he approached the back of an enormous canvas marquee and its dozens of taut, outstretched mooring lines he realised that he was *happy*. The avenue ahead was a colourful and moving throng of revellers, passing snakelike from his left to right and toward the rising avenues of flickering torches. Cadwy was instantly lifted into this carnival atmosphere as bronze horns blared, drums of all portable size were

hammered enthusiastically, whilst dozens of reed flutes and homemade crwth's were played more in competition than compliment. The resulting cacophony was so loud and joyous it made everyone happy, including all the attendant Gods in their splendour it was hoped even as Bel was charging across the other side of this world.

Hefin appeared from the shadows munching on an enormous roasted sausage and Cadwy's stomach took a sudden and savage lurch. He realised that he was ravenous suddenly, as he had not eaten since his swiftly bolted lunch of bread and cheese.

"Give me a bite of that sausage Hefin, my battle brother and faithful ally!" Cadwy beamed at him, and Hefin tucked the hot and delicious looking pork sausage behind him in a flash.

"Yeah, faithful ally when I've got food or ale!" Hefin snorted, twisting away from Cadwy's advances.

"Get your own bloody sausage, you cal-eating stockman!" Hefin laughed, dancing away from his grasping fingers. "It's only there!" He pointed with the sausage, before cramming another great piece into his mouth and chomping away merrily.

"There you go getting things backwards again." Cadwy replied easily, pointing at the dimpled tip of the remaining brown sausage, and which protruded rudely now from Hefin's fist. The skin had drawn back from the tip in cooking, and it was obvious what flashed wordlessly between them. Cadwy finished his observation drily.

"I think it's you that's munching on a cal, you great oaf!" He told him with a smirk and turned on his heel to approach the vendor himself for one of the very same sausages, fishing in his long leather riding jacket for a piece of hack silver.

Hefin smiled around his hot mouthful, watching the tall and broad figure of Cadwy as he hailed the straw capped sausage vendor tending his sizzling brazier plate. His cousin and best friend was an impressive young

man, soon to mature into a real and honourable tywysog; a true warrior-prince. Hefin counted no other man he had ever met higher than his beloved oath-sworn prince and warlord. Cadwy was constant, loyal and true to the bitter end, and his heart and his courage were both inspirational. He did not even perceive his own greatness yet, but Hefin hoped and prayed to his scared Arglwydd Camulo that Cadwy *Fawr* as his friends called him in both honour and jest would be allowed to live long enough to see his own maturity and fulfil his life's destiny, to the hopes and prayers of his family, his friends and all the proud combrogi of Albion. His pre-eminent and impressive cousin wore a vibrant silk shirt of emerald-green tonight and for obvious reasons. Over this was the black and beautifully tailored, long and lustrous leather riding jacket that fitted him like a glove. His new and fine silk shirt was open at the throat, and the boar-terminated torc around his throat glinted richly, like metal butter and liquid mercury in the torchlight and as he laughed and joked with the vendor. Cadwy's long and dark blond hair was this night closely plaited to his scalp in rows, and long, tightly coiled ropes of it fell about his shoulders with abandon, each tied with a twist of gold wire. Wearing superbly cut bracs of a brand-new and dark weave, tucked neatly into tall black riding boots with broad collars of a contrasting copper hue, Cadwy looked magnificent to Hefin as he approached, even doing the most mundane thing, like chewing a sausage. It sank in now and not for the first time precisely what he would be willing to do for his first cousin and this Selgofan prince that grinned at him now around his own mouthful of hot and spicy sausage. Hefin realised with a certain clarity of belief that he would follow this prince barefoot over hot coals and crawl all the way up Lug's hairy arse if that was where he wanted them to go. He smiled back at Cadwy nonchalantly, revealing none of this.

"Delicious aren't they combrogi?" He confirmed affably, throwing his arm about his prince's shoulders and leading him toward the northern end of this sprawling township. Cadwy nodded in agreement, trying to clear his mouth.

“Rhosmêl’s boar sausages are just the best anywhere!” Cadwy declared seriously, taking another enormous bite.

The pair followed a chanting, inebriated snake of adjoined werrin, who held each other upright as best they could as they danced onto *stryd fawr* of Tref Eil in a long line and in fine spirits. These two cousins and close friends fell in at the rear with these familiar steps and chants, and all around them were beery breaths and flushed but happy and smiling faces. This long line of singing and chanting combrogi of Albion and beyond were led uphill and into the town by a slightly dishevelled druid, who appeared none too sober himself. Hefin took up the rear with his hands on Cadwy’s broad shoulders, and they weaved along in line and chewing still, happily linked with this brash and inebriated group of locals. Once they had finished the snack, they both joined in lustily with the singing and as they passed between the decorated rows of thatches, the multitude of vendors and their beaming faces greeting them all. It was some time before Cadwy and Hefin were alone once more, and they approached the enormous, tented village now which commandeered the same piece of adjacent land year after year, just north of the town. This was where the mystical and incense-steeped pavilions of *Côr Ynys Gwyn* were erected; the druiden college for ladies on the Myrun Islands in Loch Lugh, and in *old enemy* Galedon. It was established in the same location here each year, under the long and reaching shadows of the great middle hill and the lookout’s towering beacon. It was where the druidens played annual host to this huge and fashionably dressed court, run by the honourable Ddugesi Meleri and the venerable Lady Karych, arch-druidens of that famous and sacred institution, which is a highly regarded, religious seat of learning for *all* Prydeinig ladies.

These two young royals in their finery paused by a vast brewer’s pavilion to survey the scene, and this temporary tavern was bursting at the seams with hard drinking Albion men. A gently weaving line of the same stood behind this vast tent to relieve themselves in the adjacent brook, and their words were lurid but heavily slurred. Hefin still had his arm about

Cadwy, and it draped over the prince's left shoulder now as they casually surveyed the private and enclosed showground over the rutted lane before them. Together they watched as hundreds of white robed women, young and old thronged that large arena and which was surrounded by their many marquees, some of which emitted delicious and savoury, steaming aromas of roasting meat into the night air from their long vents. Others had the entrance flaps drawn back and they could see inside, and that they were filled with tables, laden with delicacies and amphorae of the very finest wines. Most of those tents represented the many different branches and specialisms of their religion, and there were many of them. More noticeable in this necessary period of surveillance was that there was not a single man present, not even a druid. There was a rope and pole fence thrown around that encampment, but no guards, as those particular ladies needed no guardians. There was much toing-and-froing going on, and the babble of quick speaking, female voices carried to where they stood in the fumes of beer and piss deep in thought, but there had been no sign of Eirwen.

"Battle plan?" Hefin asked him casually and without turning his head. Cadwy was silent for long moments before his focus returned.

"I need a girl!" He declared, standing more upright.

"Er yes Cadwy. It's why we're here, oh sage one!" Hefin responded drily.

"No, you oaf! I need a little girl to take this token to Eirwen." Cadwy dangled a stunning, solid gold figure of the rearing stag of Galedon before Hefin's eyes. It had a magnificent, twelve-point set of curving antlers on its exquisite and noble head, and the eyes were polished chips of real emerald. This subtle, small but exquisite token was mounted to a chain of simple but elegantly twisted golden links, and it was a gem. Hefin's eyes grew huge as this treasure sparkled into life in the creased black leather of Cadwy's gloved hand.

"Lug's hairy black arse!" Hefin cursed and kissed an iron ring on his finger. "You can't give that to a girl of the tref, you'll never see her or her

family again!" He admonished him, picking it up in wonder and dangling it in front of his eyes. "How did you come by this little trinket?" One eyebrow arched in question, and Cadwy just shrugged.

"I've had it for years, but I had the emeralds mounted in the eyes by Finlo the travelling Iweriuan *aerwyr* who visited recently, for obvious reasons. He passed through DunAlclwyd two weeks ago and he promised me he would have it ready here for Beltain, and he was as good as his word as a courier delivered it just two hours ago!" Cadwy answered his compatriot with a grin, taking back the treasure.

"Still, giving it to some random little girl sounds really sketchy to me!" Hefin pressed him, and with both eyebrows arched.

"No, I meant an acolyte you great oaf!" Cadwy laughed.

"Why do you keep calling me an *oaf* and what the cnuch does it mean?" Hefin asked him with a frown, and Cadwy just shook his head, grinning at his cousin's ignorance.

"We need to find one of the druiden disciples who are giving out buttermilk and oatcakes Hef, as they are Gods-sworn and trustworthy." Cadwy told him with that enigmatic smile, turning his head to look at Hefin expectantly. "Or rather *you* need to, my most trusted scout and agent." He added with a wiggle of his eyebrows, still wearing Hefin's heavy arm like a scarf, and he held out the golden gift again with a flourish.

"Cnuch me! The work is never ending!" Hefin sighed, his shoulders dropping theatrically as he mimicked the washerwomen of the tref as he took the necklace with another sigh, and Cadwy laughed as he broke away.

"You've never had to do an honest day's work in your whole life Hefin ap Brynig!"

"Have *you* my prince?" Hefin arched that haughty eyebrow at him again as he pocketed the gold.

“As you well know, my werrin-work is never finished combrogi.” Cadwy countered acidly, smiling back at him wickedly.

“Do you mean *our* werrin-work my prince?”

“Yeah, when you bother to turn up! Now cousin go, find a cnuching acolyte before my warboot finds your prodigious arse!”

“Yes-yes my lord and prince, your every wish is my command, and I will bravely sally forth in your name and under your honourable banner to do your bidding!” Hefin bowed to him deeply, making a ribald drama out of his acquiescence, as he always did.

“You sir, are a lazy and a beardless cal-muncher!” Cadwy told him easily.

“And you sir, are a princely pig-snogger!” Hefin responded blithely, turning and strolling quickly back toward the clamour of the festivities.

“Insolent bastard!” Cadwy called after him with a grin, and Hefin turned around, so that he was walking backwards.

“Insolent? Absolutely and until my last and dying breath lord, but bastard? No, my prince, Gŵyr Balan is the bastard of the family, but I concede we do look alike!” He grinned back at him, turning again on his heel. “And we’ve both got the most enormous Cals!” He added lewdly over his shoulder, and Cadwy laughed some more, shaking his head.

Midnight had arrived in Rhosmêl central Selgofa, and Bel’s votive fire roared into the heavens, spewing up a monstrous volcano of sparks and flying embers, being by necessity quarantined downwind and in a large field between the fortress hills and the river marshes, many reeds from the nearest thatch. All combrogi were ever watchful of the great two-headed God of fire; the cleanser and the terrifying and merciless destroyer of all on the one face, the life preserving spirit of winter warmth and the shield against wild animals on the other. Still in the shadow of the towering first hill and in the centre of this vast maes, packed with celebrating werrin, Cadwy waited impatiently. He stood anonymously with his hood up under the lurid and permanent great totem of Brigida, which

had been formed from a huge and living oak tree with two enormous, outstretched limbs. It had been carved from the branches of the same oak, and then surrounded by a broad circle of gleaming quartz crystal pebbles. Delimited by the sweep of the nearby Twaid, the vast maes around this sacred idol, caught between the three hills behind it and the distant river ahead had been barren and stony, and had been known as the *bald ground* in antiquity. It was bald no longer as it had been lovingly tended to a grassy pasture over generations, becoming the enormous fayre ground of Rhosmêl. Beyond it lay Tref Rhosmêl within a glinting sweep of that major river, and Cadwy constantly scanned these crowds for Hefin's ruddy face from under one of Brigida's gaudily painted and outstretched arms, festooned as it was this night with coloured votive kloodies. Brigid too was honoured and adored at Beltain as well as her own festival of Imbolc these past months, and this earthly Brigid looming over Cadwy was festooned with votive prayers. Long minutes stretched into an agonised eternity for Cadwy, but then he caught sight of Bleddyn, today's point man and mostly from his bulk. His pencampwr's outline was unmistakeable, and as he drew near he caught Cadwy's eye and nodded confidently in his direction. Bleddyn then took up his station at the eastern, downriver approach road, his sword and mail catching the eye. A glance to Cadwy's left confirmed that Selwyn was in a similar position across this hectic maes and at the head of the northern lane, and he received a similar nod of readiness from him. Ioddo's absence was telling, and it drew a wry grin from Cadwy as he had spotted Hefin, and he was accompanied by just one female. His cousin, that impeccably dressed Selgofan prince was casually leading a deeply hooded young woman alone and by the arm around the great ring of gaudy stalls, shies and throwing games of this fayre. These pitching arcades and skittle alleys were grouped around this huge open maes, surrounding the beautifully carved and brightly coloured, deeply sacred representation of Arglwydd Brigida. Cadwy's heartbeat soared as he left Brigida's healing shadow, and as he headed at an oblique angle to join them at a large marquee from which emanated the most marvellous, sonorous singing, his

breathing became laboured. This tent was packed out with a boisterous audience and until it was literally bulging at the seams. He kept glancing over to catch a glimpse of her face as they neared, but could not, and he realised that he was panting as if he had been at sword practice. Using his training to control this galloping of heart and lungs as the distance between them shrank, suddenly he was next to them both. His heart thudded in his throat now as she raised her head and Eirwen's unique vision of loveliness was revealed in the shadow of her hood. Copper highlights shone amid the curling, auburn hair that filled the silk lined hood of her cape, and her beauty took his breath away once more. His eyes were drawn to hers, and once again they were locked together like powerful magnets. The two were riding the *Thunderbolt of Cythera* once more and in a single heartbeat. Both were instantly entranced, as for them, the earth's rotation seemed to have slowed perceptively. To one side, Hefin adopted his role as head of the team and as the conductor of tonight's ceremony. He straightened, and with a discreet cough, interrupted their mesmerised gazing. Looking Cadwy in the eye himself now and with a serious expression, as was expected from a man in his position, Hefin gathered himself and stood before them.

"My Lord and most honourable Crown Prince Cadwy ap Cridas of the House Selgofa and Albion, please allow me to introduce to you the most honourable Princess Eirwen ferch Ederus of the House Galedon!" Hefin bowed to each. "My most honoured Lady, Princess Eirwen ferch Ederus of the House Galedon, please allow me to introduce to you the most honourable Crown Prince Cadwy ap Cridas of the House Selgofa and Albion!" He bowed to each again, and the formalities at least were now complete, but a kind of nervous frisson gripped both Cadwy and Eirwen as Hefin offered Cadwy her arm and withdrew. Eirwen placed her right hand on his arm with a gossamer touch but kept her head lowered. In his role as Cadwy's *arweinydd y serch* Hefin continued to lead now, and with the crashing singing of the Albion cantorion and the roaring warriors in the main tent filling the air around them, he led this aristocratic couple casually around this concert pavilion. Taking the familiar path upriver and

toward the trees, a short way from the raucous festivities in the maes behind them, Hefin paused and turned to his royal charges.

“Please follow me and be at your ease your royal highnesses as you are both among honourable men tonight, who would lay down their lives in protection of your honour and your reputation without a moment’s thought or hesitation.” Hefin declared theatrically and with a bow of his head to both. Being Cadwy’s appointed ‘conductor of love’ tonight, Hefin was responsible for both their safety and privacy, and ostensibly at least he was taking the appointment very seriously.

“I’m almost certain no such dramatics will be required tonight gallant Prince Hefin, but it is a comforting thought nonetheless.” Eirwen answered him blithely, unleashing the most dazzling smile on Hefin, reddening his cheeks. He turned quickly away to cover his blushes, and to lead them up this slight hill alongside a swollen little brook known as Hunters Burn and which wound its way north to the river. Bleddyn and Selwyn strolled along in their wake making a casual but serious looking rear guard.

“You look a good deal better than last I saw you, my Lord Prince Cadwy!” Eirwen declared as they crossed a small stone bridge and took a tiny woodland path up into the trees, turning to him obliquely, and Cadwy frowned in response.

“I rather liked the maroon leather jacket and the matching bracs I wore that day my Honourable Lady Eirwen, and I thought I looked well enough.” He countered with a frown, tilting his head in question, and an exquisitely gloved hand flew into the hood to cover Eirwen’s giggles.

“Oh yes of course, how silly of me. You were unconscious!” She qualified with another giggle.

Cadwy’s deepening confusion showed clear on his face, and he was about to press her on the matter when they arrived suddenly at the path above his bower, and the question flew from his mind like a rainbow-hued *pili-pala* fluttering from his hand.

Hefin found the long and wickedly sharp war spear he had rested against a tree earlier, and whilst Bleddyn and Selwyn had been released to seek out Ioddo and their pleasures, he winked at Cadwy before going to his predetermined lookout point in the sure guarantee of the couple's privacy.

Now they were alone, Cadwy threw his right hand open in invitation, and Eirwen allowed him to lead her to his bower on an outcrop of rock in these trees. They turned the corner, and she gasped at the sheer beauty of his most thoughtful, vibrant creation, and her eyes shone.

"A bower! Oh Cadwy, it's perfect! How did you know I loved celandines and primroses so much?" She asked him in wonder, stooping to enter the cocoon like structure and sitting elegantly on the comfortable seat within, looking around at the interior with an unconcealed joy. Cadwy joined her carefully on the bench he had laboured at preparing and eased himself alongside her.

"Oh you know, I have my sources!" He lied glibly and with a twinkle in his eye. He turned and fetched the wicker basket from the back of this bower.

His nerves had miraculously vanished, and he felt completely at ease in her company now, but it was more than that now too he realised as he unpacked the lavish hamper. Eirwen threw back the hood of her cloak, and her glorious curls of shining auburn hair fell about her throat and shoulders in a profusion of copper and rose gold highlights. Cadwy's breath caught sharply in his throat, and he covered it gamely with a polite cough, but he was dismayed, and he cursed inwardly as his throat betrayed him again with the most treacherous pink flush. A slim and subtle, highly stylised gold torc of a superb quality adorned Eirwen's lovely neck, and she wore polished emerald earrings tonight, which in their brilliance struggled to compete with the enormous and bewitching, emerald-green eyes that looked right into Cadwy's soul at that moment. Cadwy swallowed painfully and attempted to gather his dignity about him again. The Lady Eirwen must have approved of what they discovered there, as she unleashed her dazzling smile on him now. Cadwy would come to swear that her spectacular smile could stop a charging bull at

fifty paces, and it stunned him now with its intense beauty. It almost took his breath away again, and her pearly teeth gleamed from behind the most kissable lips Cadwy had ever seen. He swallowed again, noisily.

“A little wine my Lady?” He offered gruffly to cover this flush of ardour and held out a beautiful silver goblet. Eirwen took it with another, more enigmatic smile as Cadwy pulled the cork from a small amphora of the best red wine money could buy in a hundred miles in any direction, and he carefully filled her goblet and then his own.

“We can’t go on calling each other honourable lord prince this and honourable lady princess that!” She declared with a grin, her sense of humour adding another level of sparkle to her captivating eyes.

“How about just Cadwy and Eirwen when we’re alone together?” Cadwy ventured openly.

“You’re sure there’ll be another time?” She asked him directly, those same mesmerising eyes changing so subtly he almost missed it, but as the tingling hunting alarm pulsed in the back of his brain he adopted a serious tone.

“Sincerely hoping and wishing, my honoura...”

“Eirwen and Cadwy will do just fine.” She interrupted him with another radiant smile, and Cadwy’s heart did a flip.

Lifting her goblet for the expected votive, Eirwen led him in the ancient custom; *“I’r tad a taid, ac i nain pawb. I gyd ein cu-hynafiad; parchu, anrhydedd fawr a cofion am byth!”* She toasted in her melodious and lilting voice, but with a clearly meant passion and a belief which shone from her beautiful eyes. Cadwy repeated this ubiquitous drinking oath in honour of all their ancestors as expected, and he too held up his goblet as he spoke these ancient words with an equal intent.

“To the father, the grandfather and to the grandmother of all. To all our beloved ancestors, respect, the greatest of honour and we will remember

you forever!" His eyes glittered too at this imperative oath, and their eyes met then again, seeming to do so now without thought.

In most Brythonic drinking halls, once this mandatory oath had been sworn, 'Cofion!' was enough for subsequent charges, and they both tasted the wine together then with their eyes locked over the silver rims. Their eyebrows rose in a concert of appreciation as it was superb and full of delicious bramble berry flavours. Eirwen leaned forward and took a piece of the emerald cloth of his shirt between finger and thumb, feeling the quality of the silk and noting too its colour. She looked then at the maroon design of his bracs and at the detail of its golden thread, instantly realising their tonal relevance and she blushed, causing a delicious rosy colour to flush her throat.

"Very smart, and *my* colours too!" She smiled at him again, speaking in that most direct way of hers, and it was like a breath of fresh air to Cadwy. Eirwen then delved into a purse on her belt and brought out the beautiful golden stag pendant and chain he had sent her, so that the golden links caught the light as they spilled from her silk gloved hand. "It's so beautiful Cadwy, but I can't accept this, it's far too....well, much!" She blustered and held out the charm, but Cadwy reached out and closed her own fingers back around the pendant.

"I've had it for years, but it was yours the first moment we met, my Lady....Eirwen." He corrected himself earnestly, staring into the bewitching, captivating depths of her beautiful eyes but with his treasonous neck still glowing warmly.

Eirwen demurred for a long moment, before she untangled the chain, drew it over her head and hung it around her neck. Cadwy's mouth hung open but only for the briefest of moments, and his whole body was suddenly bathed in the most glorious feeling, as this simple gesture meant the whole world to him. He took another deep breath before taking the goblet tenderly from her fingers and placing it back in the basket at his feet along with his own. Then he took both Eirwen's slender hands in his, and his burning soul soared into the heavens as finally, Cadwy

thought he could actually taste success. For one electrifying moment, Cadwy accepted that this dazzling, terrifying Goddess could actually become his woman, and his mind whirled at the possibility. His heartbeat rocketed and his throat reddened, but Cadwy recalled Hefin's words and gathered his mettle. Eirwen's face had adopted a look of mild surprise as he clasped her hands in his, and at the earnest look which now took hold of his face.

"Eirwen, I have...." A loud *crack* on the wall of this bower interrupted him, and Cadwy scowled, shaking his head. Hefin was obviously playing the fool and had thrown a rock at them. The idiot could not have picked a more inopportune moment, and a flare of anger burned inside Cadwy now. Hefin could be very childish at times, but this was definitely not the time for his incessant tomfoolery. Cadwy had to suppress this sudden bloom of anger for obvious reasons, but he determined there and then to read his battle driver the riot act and at the earliest opportunity. Maybe, even a fat lip was not out of the question this time. He shifted on his seat, took a deep breath and tried to put Hefin from his mind and compose himself once more. Their eyes met again, but now the shadow of question was in both. Before Cadwy could utter one more word, there was another even louder *Crack!* and the heather shifted slightly beneath them. Now both their eyes flew wide open in apprehension, and Eirwen was about to speak when there was another almighty *CRACK!* and the floor of this bower moved. Then it slid from under them both. Cadwy's heart nearly seized in alarm, and he was instantly galvanised by one crucial imperative; to stop them both from sliding over the edge of this ridge.

"Nooo!" He yelled frantically, digging the heels of his riding boots into the shale to slow them down, as the whole thing had started to slide downhill. His left hand clawed out for a grip, a branch, a root anything! His right arm shot out and he tried to grab Eirwen's arm, but she was dropping too, quicker than he was and he just managed to snatch a fistful of her cloak, but it was inevitable. With breaking twigs and cracking branches and with a sudden and wet surge amid this quickly crumbling edifice, they both

began to slide down the almost vertical scree of flowing, water borne shale which had effectively undermined this bower. Eirwen's brooch *pinged* off somewhere, and with horror twisting his features, Cadwy was left gripping her cloak as she inexorably slid away from him, shock and terror clear on her face as she fell. Eirwen screamed as she plummeted and as she was launched over the crumbling edge of this ridge to drop almost twenty feet in a landslide of water, shale and rocks. She hit the flooded, muddy ditch of Hunters Burn below on her back and with an enormous, starfish like slap! This shocking impact caused a ring wave of mud to explode outwards as Eirwen splashed hard into the wet bog below. The dark, almost black mud recoiled almost instantly and Eirwen was inundated by the filth. Moments later Cadwy fell feet-first into the same ditch of almost waist-deep, glutinous mud and amid a similar shower of shale and dirty water. He covered his head with both hands as he was pelted with these sharp rocks and the remnants of his crumbling bower, and with bent knees he hit the thick mud fast, feeling the sting as he plummeted into it, his face and both arms slapping hard onto the cold surface. Dipping right up to his chest, the cold was a shock, driving the air from his lungs with a loud gasp, but he managed to keep his balance as his feet met firmer ground. Cadwy stood and gulped in air, almost choking on the foul, waist-high mud he was covered in and spitting it from his mouth as soon as his footing was secure. Cuffing the mud from his face, Cadwy's fearful eyes flicked instantly to Eirwen, who was trying to gain her feet unsteadily and with her arms flailing as she fought for balance. Standing forlornly and barely twenty reeds away now, she was completely enveloped in this thick, river-stinking and foetid mud, but at least she *looked* uninjured.

"Eirwen! Are you alright?" Cadwy croaked out to her, fear and concern burring his voice, and he tried to wade through this gloop toward her, still spitting grit and mud. It was like a boyhood nightmare, but he struggled valiantly on toward her still wiping this odious muck from his eyes and his mouth. "Speak to me Eirwen!" He yelled, and Eirwen lifted her head, but

she looked utterly distraught at that moment and with her lovely bottom lip protruding in an adorable, but mud smeared pout.

"I am whole and uninjured Cadwy thank you but look at me!" She wailed, holding her arms out as mud ran from them in black, gloopy bubbles. "My dress and cloak are ruined, my hair is destroyed, and I'm covered in stinking mud, but apart from that I'm fine thank you very much!" She stated morosely, trying to flick the mud from her arms. Cadwy ploughed onwards through this glutinous muck toward her, his legs burning with the effort, just as his neck burned with the embarrassment. The ground rose a little as he approached her, and so the going got a little easier if not the humiliation.

Eirwen's muddy left hand found her bare and muddy left ear lobe, and she let out a plaintive wail.

"Oh no, my nain gave me these earrings!" She cried out, and her tears finally broke, cleaving two clean tracks through the mud on her cheeks.

Cadwy finally got to her, and he threw his arms around her wet and muddy shoulders. She instantly put her arms about his soggy waist, and she hugged him hard, sobbing.

"And your lovely new clothes are ruined too!" She sniffed, and as Cadwy nursed the lingering touch of stiffness in his neck with a free hand, her eyes flew open. "Oh, my darling Cadwy, your poor head! I'd forgotten!" She blurted this out with her eyes full of concern, and one muddy but slender hand was pressed tenderly to his equally filthy face. Cadwy's soul soared, not only from her caring touch or the clear and obvious care for his wellbeing in her mellifluous voice, but for that glorious, wonderful word she had used, and *darling* echoed around his mind, bouncing around his skull like a pebble in a whirlpool, and his heart pounded in his chest just as painfully as she clung to him weeping.

Unknown moments later, they both heard the unmistakable sounds of someone crashing through the undergrowth amid the torn remnants of Cadwy's bower above them, and Hefin's red face appeared above the still

crumbling and dribbling ridgeline. He hung onto a lopsided tree and with concern deeply etching his young face as he looked down at them both. Hefin took in the scene below him in an instant, and suddenly his face creased an entirely different way, using a different set of muscles completely, and Hefin began to fall about laughing. He rolled about on that crumpled ridge above them and among the sundered remnants of his bower completely helpless with laughter, and Cadwy felt the corrosive bloom of his mushrooming anger burn his insides again. His shame fanned these flames of scorched pride, and his fists clenched tightly behind Eirwen as he silently fumed at Hefin's echoing laughter. Hefin seemed to pull himself together somewhat and headed down the pathway from the trees to the little stone bridge over this swollen brook and to the enwrapped, mud glued couple in its bankside ditch. They could hear his continued gales of laughter as he made his way down and around to them, and Cadwy's anger bloomed again. Dangerous lights sparked then in his eyes at this mocking laughter, but Eirwen began to shake a little differently in his embrace at that angry moment. He saw to his surprise that she was laughing, and it spoke volumes of her character. It was entirely infectious too, and abruptly they were both roaring with laughter in each other's arms, bound by this muddy filth which cloaked them both, but also now by so much more. Even as he stood there up to his waist in this cold and stinking mud, Cadwy realised that Eirwen had never looked more beautiful to him as she did at that heart stopping moment, entirely mud splattered and dishevelled. Within that tiny and precise point in time, Cadwy fell completely and utterly in love with Princess Eirwen ferch Ederus of Galedon. As Eirwen looked up and with the two pink lines running down her muddy face, their eyes locked again, and Cythera's aim was just as steady tonight. For long seconds they just gazed into each other's eyes, mesmerised. Then Cadwy broke the spell and took her mud splashed, beautiful face in both of his muck covered hands and bent to kiss her. They folded into each other completely then and kissed properly for the first time, and an adept would have seen heavenly sparks flying from the pair of them. Oblivious of their atrocious surroundings, they

could have been all alone atop a mist wreathed mountain somewhere very far from here.

They were entwined about each other like muddy snakes when Hefin approached them, wide eyed but silent now, as he alone knew that neither of their lives would ever be the same again.

* * * * *

Cadwy had slept fitfully but had bathed and dressed comfortably since last night's calamity. He had risen early, and he ate his griddled kidneys and bacon, two poached duck eggs and a hunk of toasted bread moodily. His troubled mind rolled around the words he had practised with Hefin, but whichever way he looked at it, he did not think his words would be enough and it worried him. He had the position to request a meeting with his tad, but that's where any favouritism ended as King Cridas was as daunting to him as he was to anyone else. He was not a man to be trifled with that much he had learned as a toddler, and so he had taken great care with his appearance this morning, despite his exhaustion. Cadwy finished his break of fast alone, before heading out from this still empty refectory. Pushing the heavy oak door closed behind him, he ducked under the thatch and braved the wind-blown pen of this colossal fortress. It was finally the beginning of summer, and with the major annual festival of Beltain complete all Brythons began to smile again, and Cadwy could not deny the lift to his own spirits. Regardless of this auspicious day and the season it purported to herald, it was cold within these battlements of DunEil. It was as cold as the grave at the start of a new day in this hilltop caer, or when the sun went down and the shadows lengthened, or when the wind picked up as it had this blustery morning. The cold suited Cadwy's outlook today however as although buoyed by Bel's everlasting promise, he was in no mood for the company of his cyfail just yet, as their ribbing about his 'Beltain Bower Fiasco' would be merciless and so he had risen with the first birdsong. Last night could have been an unmitigated disaster of course had they not made such a great leap forward in their personal relationship, especially at the embarrassing but touching and

entirely memorable denouement of their first evening together. Although mortified then and now by that unforeseen calamity and the subsequent, deeply uncomfortable procedure in which Eirwen was returned to her sisterhood in far less glamorous circumstance than when she had left, he still fizzed with the knowledge that his unrelenting feelings were reciprocated, in fact, he could think of little else. Turning his head away from this scouring, grit laden wind that swooped over these palisades, Cadwy headed for the door to the great hall across this high quadrangle, and the wind was so stiff it nearly blew him off his feet. He scuttled on across the square, battling this gale like a drunkard as flying sheets of sandy dust whipped past him, stinging his eyes. The foot thick thatching which roofed his father's great hall ahead although sound, was yellowed with age and spotted with dark patches of lichen. The whole length of the roof needed to be pinned down with shaved laths of latticed timber, stitched through the thatching itself, as did all the roofing on this blustery high fortress. Cadwy reached the shelter of the hall's porch set between the two deeply carved and massive oak posts, and he ducked under the tatty, wind eaten and shivering fringe of this enormous thatch. Cadwy pushed the heavy, iron studded and strapped door open and gratefully slipped inside, blinking the dust from his eyes. Dusting himself off and wiping his damp palms on his bracs, Cadwy's nerves jangled again now as the time was at hand, and he headed between the many empty rows of benched tables absently. He passed below the ancient, utterly familiar ridgelines of carved and decorated roof beams without even seeing them this morning. Coming to the head of this great hall, Cadwy moved to the right of the dais and went through the big oak door in the corner.

Sitting on the comfortable benches in the royal waiting room which shared the same corridor as his tad's private state rooms, Cadwy worried a thumbnail as he waited, going over and over what he planned to say. It was not long before Amren his tad's squire came to fetch him and Cadwy stood to follow the young *arwein*, absently brushing himself down again as he was led the familiar route and through the great door to the king's

chambers. Amren led him to a comfortable chair by the window, close to a roaring fire in a wide iron grate and Cadwy sat again to wait.

“He won’t be long Prince Cadwy.” Amren informed him with a smile and a formal bow before going about his business.

Cadwy’s nerves returned, hearing his tad coughing as he approached, and then the door to his private chambers was thrown open before him.

Cadwy stood quickly and smiled without thought before bowing deeply as his father came through the heavy door.

“Good morning Cadwy. It’s nice to see you my son. What can your old father do for you on this glorious summer day?” He asked him affably, ignoring the chill wind howling through the cracks in the window openings.

Returning Cadwy’s bow with a nod, Cridas closed the door behind him and waved him back to sit, taking the opposite chair. Cadwy sat back down in the left-hand chair, knowing his tad preferred the other, and Cridas joined his son, slumping into his chair with the great sigh of a busy man before smiling at his son and awaiting his pleasure. These two big and comfortable chairs had been set close together near the fire, each facing the other in front of one of the narrow windows in this personal meeting room of the king’s, and which looked out over the wind scoured courtyard of his fortress and toward the huge, gated entrance. These narrow windows were designed to enable archers to shoot through them in a siege, but they also allowed much warmth to escape and a great deal of cold and rain to get in, so, in foul weather, the stout and heavily waxed outer shutters hanging to either side of the openings were closed and latched from within. These rugged timber closures kept most of the bad weather out, supported by the finer jointed, snug fitting and highly embellished inner shutters. These were secured with a bronze latch against a soft leather gasket in the usual way, and the heavy woollen curtains when drawn across, as they were now killed almost all the remaining draughts. The most elusive, die-hard remnants of these penetrating spirits would then whistle rudely through the cracks and crevices remaining in the stonework had they not been plugged with

scraps of waxed cloth, but on days like today they were unassailable, and they issued a veritable orchestra of vulgar whistles and sorrowful moans.

Cadwy was a little thrown by his father's good humour and friendly attitude, and he cleared his throat carefully before looking his father straight in the eye, just as he had been brought up to do. "I need to speak to you about something important your majesty. Well, important to me!" He qualified with respect, lowering his gaze.

"Tad will do boy." Cridas told him affably and winked at him when his gaze returned. "And is this nervous supplication about one Princess Eirwen of Galedon by any chance?" He asked with raised eyebrows, and Cadwy's mouth fell open.

"How on earth....oh never mind, I was about to ask a stupid question." Cadwy declared with a wolfish grin, and Cridas chuckled.

"Mm, I suspect you were son. There isn't much that goes on in my kingdom that I don't get to hear about, or I wouldn't be its king for very long!" He told him jovially. "Especially an event that shall we say..... causes a big splash!" He added, with another chuckle and raised eyebrows. Cadwy hung his head, shaking it as he laughed bitterly at himself and with an embarrassed look, but he held his silence. "Is it serious?" Cridas asked him more sincerely, looking closely at Cadwy, and his son nodded slowly in response before looking up and soberly meeting his father's eyes.

"Yes tad it is. All the world knows she's beautiful, but there is far more to her than just a pretty face. She is unlike any girl I've ever met. She's clever and funny tad and honourable too, but it's far more than that, as she's..... well she's fierce and terrifying, and yet soft and wonderful all at the same time!" He said this to his father with more than a touch of awe on his young face, but which was covered quickly by his blushes and his lowered head.

His father laughed, but the laughter died a swift and bitter death in his throat.

“Oh dear, that serious.” Cridas murmured lugubriously, his eyes adopting the vaguely unfocused gaze of remembrance, and Cadwy looked up at him curiously.

“I love the girl tad!” Cadwy blurted out.

Cridas shook his head in deep thought, turning away. His memories crowding his senses painfully now and as his past suddenly called out to him from across the abyss.

“Yes-yes, of course, but love? What bloody use is love to anyone in these uncertain times?” Cridas muttered seriously but absently and quietly, clearly more to himself. The king turned back to face his son to share this doubt, but he relented immediately as Cadwy’s throat had coloured and a bleak look had saddened his eyes. Cridas’ mind was awash with memories and long forgotten feelings from a time long ago, and a time when he had felt such passion for a girl. But he had to admit to himself that Cadwy’s choice was far more acceptable than his own had been, as he had fallen head over heels for a local farmer’s daughter. It had never been allowed to develop, as such handfastings were unheard of in his day and barred, and Cridas had been forced to give up his glowing love for that farmer’s daughter. He scowled then, as try as he might, he could not bring the girls’ name to mind, and it galled and shamed him in equal measure. He could never forget the years of pain and frustration separation had caused him, however. ‘Eirlys!’ Her name came blazing back to him from the years of his youth, giving him some small measure of relief, but he was not sure if he wanted Cadwy to go through the same pain and anguish he had. Cridas was a great believer in the adage, however; ‘what does not kill you makes you stronger’ and at least his son’s choice was equivalent in honour and standing, but the proposal was not without its complications and some very real risks, as they were talking about a princess of the old enemy no less. As his son intuitively remained silent but watching him intently, Cridas’ mind focused on those immense political challenges which lay ahead of them both, like hidden beartraps in a misty and tangled, snake infested undergrowth. Unknown to Cadwy, he had already

endured a long and very pointed discussion on the subject with the Lady Meleri and had eventually agreed to her bold proposal. Cridas had given his permission so that she could continue with the ancient process at least, and had even given his blessing to the plan, sharing Meleri's colourfully spun vision of the possible grand prize of alliance. Even overlooking her rather ridiculous overarching fear of some huge insurrection brewing in the northwest which would demand it, her imagery of this greater northern alliance had soon lost its lustre in the cold light of day, adding many seemingly insurmountable problems to Cridas' burgeoning list. He had no objection to the pursuit of the marital union in the way Meleri had outlined, nor did he balk at the cost in metal or the friends he would need to convince to allow the druiden her machinations, but Cridas doubted their future martial alliance with Galedon against some foreseen common adversary, as they were still *officially* mortal enemies. However, the latest 'national' developments had added some unexpected hues to the political palette, and which had made the unlikely proposition at least worth considering. Should the worse happen on the south coast regarding Julius Caesar and he decides to march north, his and Ederus' armies could well be thrust together in a desperate defence of their territories. Cridas shook his head then as his thoughts returned to the present and as his livid eyes returned to his son's.

"Your great aunt Meleri has already spoken to me at *great* length on the subject Cadwy!" Cridas told him with feeling and a deep sigh, breaking the silence. "I think she wore me down, or she used one of her nefarious mind spells on me, but however she managed it, I have agreed to her proceeding with the old rules and practices anyway, in as much as the marital requests be made." He told Cadwy this slowly but with a wry smile, watching as the young man before him received his manumission of the heart. He saw by his widening eyes that his son's soul had soared at the news. Cridas felt the love he had for his only son keenly at that moment as there was no guile in the boy, and his soul and his thoughts were all writ large on his earnest young face. It dawned on him then too

and in a rush that he was no longer a boy, and Cridas determined then and there never to think of him as such again.

“Tad, you mean....?”

“I mean, you don’t count your chickens until the eggs have actually hatched son!” Cridas interrupted him sternly. “There are many weeks ahead of us before Lughnas, and all I’ve agreed to is that the druidens can proceed with those ancient observations they unearthed, but I warn you, King Ederus will be a big stumbling block despite recent developments and future possibilities.” He informed his son soberly, and Cadwy nodded in agreement, but he could not stop the wondrous look that took hold of his features nor the living sparkle that lit his eyes now, but a steely determination still firmed his jawline.

“I know this, it is my greatest worry, but we love each other tad and I will do whatever it takes to make her mine!” He swore, the fire of his passion blazing in his eyes again.

“And yet, you may still have to be there to watch her marry someone else and look happy about it!” His father spoke these cruel, incisive words directly, looking deep into his son’s eyes. Cadwy opened his mouth to protest but changed his mind and said nothing. He nodded slowly, a bleak look clouding the depths of those blue eyes as he clearly struggled to accept this impossible but altogether probable outcome. Cridas watched proudly as his son grew into the man before his eyes, and his own soul soared from the experience.

“Yes I see that too tad!” Cadwy said eventually, nodding sadly. “I must prepare myself for that eventuality, but I thank you for your permission and your generosity in allowing great aunt Meleri to proceed with the sacred requests and the sacrifices at least, but I won’t give up!” He said looking up, forcing a pained smile.

Cridas’ pride was overflowing as his son displayed his true and honourable character at that moment. He leaned forward to pat his son’s knee.

“Now you’re talking like an Albion Tywysog!” Cridas declared gruffly, his love constricting his throat. “But don’t write the handfasting off just yet son, as I have ideas in that regard!”

Cadwy’s eyes grew at this revelation, and he sat back to listen to the father he had never loved more than he did at that precise moment. Over the next hour his love and respect grew to one of adoration, as his awesome father proceeded to outline his cunning plans for him and this quickly approaching summer.



Chapter Ten.

Both long, stone workshops below were in full swing and so was this year's summer. Their large doors hung wide open to allow some of the intense heat to escape as the forge within each was a glowing furnace this morning. Whilst these fiery workplaces were annoyingly popular on frosty winter mornings, most people stayed clear in this hot weather, and they were both forsaken by the usual spectators today. Both Smithys were busy regardless of this intense heat, and their anvil thrashing clamour could be heard across this fortress and even in the town below and across the river. Both immensely muscled smiths, along with their gangs of burly assistants and bellows-workers were all stripped to linen shorts under their heavy leather aprons and thick gloves, but the sweat ran from them all in rivers, nonetheless.

The air around this corner of the vast and sprawling fortress of King Caswallawn's CaerGwlyb had been filled with the bell like ringing of both his smith's hammers for many weeks as those accomplished metalworkers produced many hundreds of weapons for him. The *smelt-smith* produced a steady stream of high-quality steel *moods* or blanks for his colleague and twin brother the *forge-smith*, working next door in the adjacent and equally large workshop. Both identical looking, hugely muscular men were in the prime of their late thirties and were adept at both disciplines, handed down to them from their father and their father's fathers, back five centuries to when Brutus had arrived from the Mediterranean, bringing with him so many advancements over and above new metallurgy for warfare. Gofan and Gofyn had found the wherewithal to perfect their ancient and unique, expert specialisms in this wealthy king's caer, and they had not looked back. Gofan the smelt-smith produced *moods* of the correct iron mix for each different weapon's needs, alloying the required steel from the varying grades and structures of ores at his disposal. These unfinished blanks were then passed next door, where his equally gifted twin; the forge-smith Gofyn would fashion the steel to its required final form and temper. To have it thus organised

was to both men's advantage and a huge boon to efficiency, endowing a rare and consistently high quality to Caswallawn's expensive and burgeoning arsenal of new and distinctly Trojan looking weapons. Gofan's expertise was unmatched in recognising the formations of good iron in a bloom, and then distinguishing their individual potential properties, before then selecting these various grades and assembling them correctly to manufacture the correct steel needed for each required weapon. Good, weapons grade steel cannot be created without proper supplication and votive offering to the Gods, especially the ancient smith's prayers to Arglwydd Gofannon; the Smith-God. *His* antediluvian rites at the point of creation even the werrin knew were crucial and imperative, and these two brothers were steeped in these ancient rituals. Neither could hard steel be wrought from the heart of soft iron without prodigious heat, much charcoal and a druid's blessing. What the ordinary, working werrin of Prydain did not know was that real *Trojan* quality steel for superior swords took bones, crushed and human preferably, but these smiths alone knew that the bones of your enemies were by far and away the best. Caswallawn had parted with a large buckskin draw bag full of gold coin for two sacks of genuine Roman bones from Gallia, and his burly smiths had pounded these to powder before mixing the yellowed fragments with the charcoal for their antediluvian smelting process. Gofan had melted, alloyed and poured this sacred, magical mixture into fine, hard steel blanks, and his brother Gofyn had then heated, folded and hammered that fine, bright new steel into superb new weapons.

Content that his war plans were reaching fruition at last, Caswallawn watched from this high vantage point as the final pieces of his puzzle fell into place. More bundles of arms were covered up before being carried to his armoury, and over the last couple of months his foundry had consumed great cartloads of iron ore in this manufacturing imperative. Caswallawn had also found the need to send further afield, and at eye-watering cost for iron ore of a particularly high quality demanded by these extraordinary metallurgist twins, and to produce the real and superior steel required for the manufacture of the highest quality swords the

Brythonic aristocracy still loved so much. Huge and heavy cartloads of jute sacks filled with crushed rocks had arrived in clouds of purple dust, each hauled by an enormous pair of hump-backed and hugely muscled aurochs. These powerful animals were of gigantic proportion and whose curving crescents of pointed horn could encompass ten big men in each hoop. The progenitors to these massive and muscular beasts of burden were thought to have roamed these lands a millennia ago in vast herds, being the very staple of the ancient and nomadic Ailyr, but those wild and uncontrollable monstrosities had long vanished from Prydein along with the Ailyr's herds of reindeer. These more domesticated, modern-day equivalents had to be imported from Gallia now, and at great expense and no small undertaking, but a well-cared for auroch could return that investment inside a year with its great strength and unmatched endurance. Those pairs of musclebound beasts which had trundled up the ramp between the great gate towers of the outer palisade and into Caswallawn's caer had hauled their heavy loads for weeks. Caswallawn was keenly aware that it took very special and acutely observant carters to manage those massive, muscular and giant cattle which were only ever *partly* tamed to the yoke. An auroch could, if mistreated in any way turn in an instant from a powerful, responsive beast of burden into a bellowing beast of mayhem, rampage and slaughter. Overcoming all these difficulties, the experienced haulage carters of Khumry Dde had travelled more than two hundred miles east, all the way from the iron rich hills of Demeta and his home country, and Caswallawn had spent a large bag of the late King Dunfallawn's ill-gotten gold in the undertaking.

The huge number of bladed weapons along with the countless spear, axe and arrowheads which had been created by those industrious twins below were all handed over to his senior armourers to assemble and to finish. These highly skilled men and women would manufacture the webbing, scabbards or sheaths needed, and they would affix the staffs, handles and grips required, all of which were made by other skilled locals. Other specialists of their armourer's arts were tasked then to grind and to hone the cutting edges of these weapons, completely finishing them and

readying them for battle. The wood and the leather were lavishly coated with either linseed or lanolin and the honed steel of each weapon would then be smeared with a refined beef tallow before they could all be stored in readiness. Just as Hector's weapons manufacturer Miseus' armoury had filled with the weapons of war required those centuries ago in Troy, Caswallawn's secure armoury was slowly filling with the same here in Casufelawny, to the same ancient formulas and to the same clashing and metallic crescendos. Miseus' infamous and blue tinted Trojan swords were what their noble ancestors had used in the second great war which had finally destroyed their great city. Troy and its superb Trojans had ruled all Anatolia with their outstanding weapons of war, and Caswallawn's war chest was slowly filling with the same high grade steel tools and weapons needed to prosecute this coming war along with all the other martial requirements of a flourishing kingdom. He watched the surreal scene below him, as in the ferocious, building heat of this morning his identical, sweating smiths pounded the glowing and sparking iron into submission. He could look down on both workshops through this window opening in the reed-thick western wall of these corner tower lodges, and he would sit here for many hours as he ordered his thoughts and plotted his future.

This evening brought with it a cooling breeze more potent than any meddyg's potion, and it stirred Caswallawn's dark, curly hair as he sat relaxing, content that all was in hand. Supping fresh and warm medd melys from a chased silver cup, he watched the workings of his indentured metalsmithing twins below, appreciating where a large portion of his plundered wealth had been recently invested. Today, he had strong hopes of replacing that wealth and in the dark hours of this approaching night. Caswallawn had arranged this overstuffed but eminently comfortable chair by the window in this upper chamber weeks ago, and this lavish room was part of the lodges he reserved for visiting nobles for just this viewpoint, and his bare feet were thrown onto a cushioned footstool as he relaxed and refreshed himself. This wonderful, refreshing breeze blew through an open window behind him in this sumptuous chamber, wafting the white linen sheets hanging to the floor at either side

of the tall opening, and Caswallawn wriggled his bare toes in a moment of pure personal pleasure. Away from the hurly-burly of his court, only Berwyn his pencampwr knew of this bolthole, and he stretched out again now, revelling in these rare moments of privacy and solitude. The shutters of his lodge and this whole fortress had been thrown open soon after sunrise, but even with all the doors and shutters wide open, the heat still rose oppressively throughout the day without the right wind. The stone passageways and chambers of this huge caer were cooling now with this blessed breeze, and as the dying sun brushed fingers of dark blood across an utterly black sky above, its demise covered the great thatched smithies below him with slowly shifting, angular shadows. The spiked palisades of the western battlements beyond them were thrown into even sharper relief now, and their jagged shadows crawled infinitely slowly across the expanse of turf laid out before him as Bel vanished over the western hills. Caswallawn sighed and stretched again, reviewing what yet lay ahead of him on this memorable day.

Caswallawn's vassal lord Gŵyr Guto ap Cadog ran his central stronghold to the west known as CaerMencipiwr, and it was a modernised and massively improved hillfort of the old people but with much additional and costly recent work. That caer was considered formidable and seemed at least to be impenetrable to anything but a large and most determined force. His son, Crown Prince Tasgyofan has his seventeenth birthday celebration nine days hence, and although a fine swordsman and a recognised leader already, he was still too green to run that busy garrison fortress on his own authority. He was approaching that milestone in his life with alarming speed however, and Tasgyofan was at this moment carrying out his strict orders alongside his vassal Gŵyr Guto at CaerMencipiwr, less than seven miles southwest of where Caswallawn sat in relaxed comfort. He had known for some hours and by way of a clandestine bird message that the expected host of *black-fox* warriors had arrived at this other central stronghold, answering both his call via his extended royal family; the Demetau's Gorddofic rulers, and his other, *remunerative* call which had promised payment in gold coin. In answer to

Caswallawn's promise and his delivered coin of half-payment, King Brithael ap Berian of the Demetau had sent him a company of his best warriors and in the form of a band of deadly efficient black-fox warriors. This tightly knit warband was Brithael's personal and very best brigade of shock-troops, among which were an elite corps of the wild Wythonau's 'shadow stalkers', who had come from their more westerly *CaerClawdd* in response to the call of their overlord king. These experienced, front-line assault warriors had travelled northeast from their territory situated on the rocky 'toe' of *Khumry* and had travelled secretly then east, mostly at night. Traversing the heartlands of *Essyllyria* unremarked, they had arrived at the marshlands of its eastern coast and crossed the mudflats of *aber Hafren* there at *pont cerryg ddu*. In the darkest hours, they had quietly passed into the lands of Caswallawn's vassal *Dobunny* tribe, again unseen and unheard, which was no mean feat for such a large force. Following more than four days of fast marching from the broad *Hafren* estuary, those dark and secretive soldiers had arrived without ceremony or alarm at Caswallawn's *CaerMencipiwr*. Those highly trained and wickedly efficient warriors had arrived at Caswallawn's secondary fortress the day previously, and he knew these men will have been rested, fed and well-watered in preparation for tonight's crucial operation. Caswallawn considered that if his timing was accurate as he gazed across his wide courtyard, he expected them to be passing unseen just north of this *caer* within the hour, on their way eastwards to his orders, in the dark and in total secrecy. Caswallawn sighed and stretched again, and the most powerful man in *Lloegr*, this self-proclaimed and famously ambitious high king of the *Brythonau Dde* smiled to himself, supped his mead and relaxed, watching the dozens of stewards, servants and slaves dashing about his sprawling fortress. His minions lugged tables and chairs or large wicker baskets containing all manner of things here and there, all hurriedly trying to finish the detailed preparations for tonight's hugely important and pivotal council of war. Caswallawn wriggled his toes some more and was content, as he simply loved work and could happily watch it all day.

This congress he had called for his Southern Brythons would take place in just a few short hours and the excitement had been building all day in this fortress. This event was fraught with possible difficulties and obstacles, but with the important and powerful players all singing the same song, Caswallawn expected this evening to be highly successful on both fronts; the widely known and the utterly secret. Tonight's crychiad was twenty-one portentous days before Lughnas, being a number of power, but also leaving plenty of time to organise the imperative seasonal festival for Lug himself. The constant bustle and rushing about of stewards in preparation for tonight's assembly had been an entertainment to Caswallawn throughout the morning, but as the first groups of horses arrived bearing his vassal lords and the panicky rushing about faded on the quadrangle, the gates and the stables became suddenly quite busy. As Caswallawn roused himself, yawning hugely and preparing himself for the fuss and the babble of courtiers ahead, a stillness descended on his caer as if all in it were taking a deep breath before this looming and all-important council of war.

Over the next two hours, Caswallawn's capital filled with the hundreds of priests, royals, nobles and the gŵyrd of his southern Brythonic Houses, along with many other bards, poets, craftsmen, traders and tribal leaders. Virtually all Lloegr had been followed through the great gates, under Caswallawn's killing gantry and into this vast interior by equally august people from across Prydein once they had handed in all weapons to Caswallawn's stewards at the gatehouse, except honour-daggers of course. The feast in the maes had been hugely successful, and many people had commented on the quality of the food and the refreshment Caswallawn had provided. Inside the great hall, all the crockery and debris from the excellent feast for the aristocracy had been cleared away for tonight's essential business, and this vitally important convention was at last ready. The screaming Lynx cygil of the House Casufelawny stared down with open mouthed ferocity at the people in this tightly packed, great and smoky hall from behind the raised dais, and from where Caswallawn sat easily on his spectacular throne. The thick, iron studded

oak door to this great hall was held open to let the fetid heat out and some fresh air in, but also so that the multitude pressed hard against the outside could hear. Caswallawn smiled at an ecstatic group of Carfetan gŵyrd from Breged's northernmost territory, surprising visitors who had travelled far. They were gathered in the smoky centre of his great hall and were greeting each other rowdily. General Cadallan ap Cadall stood proudly among them and under his banner with the *leaping-deer* cygil. This notorious pencad nodded, smiling across at Caswallawn, and he bowed to him now, clearly pleased at being voted *Cadlywydd*; the 'Commander in the field' of this huge and soon allied army. Many present were convinced that the title of *Pendragon* was soon to follow for the expected Roman war, and Caswallawn coolly surveyed this broad and powerful General who will lead their triadic and pioneering alliance south. He was a man of true legend, and none other than the infamous warlord and military ruler of the Carfetau himself. Caswallawn knew Cadallan to be an iron man and a man who rules CaerLiwelyd with both iron fists. Caswallawn was looking at the accepted, most experienced campaign leader among his nation's peers, and he did seem to fit the bill. Including his vote, Cadallan's nomination by the kings' council had more to do with his and his tribe's ferocity, and their legendary refusal to give an inch than any perceived 'pecking order'. The ancient and honourable lands of the Carfetau are populated with the fiercest and most independent tribes in Prydein, possessing a direct and unbroken bloodline stretching right back to their own Trojan legacy, and their pride in their own valour and integrity is known throughout these lands. In their long and proud history, especially as they are a borderland tribe, there have been times when they have been almost completely overrun and utterly defeated. However, their treflans, trefs and their duns have always been defended almost to the last man, woman and child. This inherent refusal to capitulate at any and all costs is part of who they are, and their rare courage sustains them through the hardest of times and the cruellest of winters. The Carfetau never shie from any challenge, ignore no insult and will step aside for no man or woman, and they have proved this for centuries with their own

blood, countless times. It was the born and natural leader of these fierce people who stared back at Caswallawn now, and although he was no king, this legendary General regarded him with respect yes, but also with a clear attitude of equality. The Carfetau are a *military* house and refuse to be ruled by any king, yet Caswallawn felt no ill-will at this credo. Rather, he admired their stubborn refusal to be subdued by *any* force, but the irony was clear, as Cadallan ran Carfeta as a military dictator; a *warlord* who was a king in all but name. However, being of direct Trojan heritage, every man woman and child of Carfetau's ancient bloodlines were militarily trained from the time they could walk, and so the people *are* the military, and the militia is the people. The werrin are Cadallan's extended army, and so ostensibly at least they govern themselves, at least that is what Cadallan would have you believe. Caswallawn continued to assess the great general from his dazzling throne, watching as he laughed and chatted with his fearsome gŵyrd on the benches, and he had to concede that the broad and muscular warrior did indeed look the part. Caswallawn relaxed further into this magnificent throne, and he looked on at the garrulous Carfetau with an amused grin. This huge and glittering, golden seat which supported him had been dedicated to his ancient ancestor, and it was sun shaped, throwing up a fabulous fan of sunrays to form the broad and flared back. This throne had been carved from one giant oak for his famous father and then covered in pure gold. Beli Mawr had used it on several public occasions, and Caswallawn could feel the latent power in its frame still as he relaxed in its gilded splendour. The gold had long ago been worn from the seat and the armrests, but no one could see this from behind the parth y brenin. This dazzling seat in the form of the famed sunburst throne had been carved by a true master of old Gallia and in the swirling, interlocking style so loved by all combrogi. As it glinted in the firelight, it's lavish lustre caught every eye in this great hall. Enveloped by the golden gleam of his magnificent throne, Caswallawn shared this dais with his pencampwr, a group of four serious looking priests in a huddle and a number of other nobles, and all eyes were on him now as he prepared to address this large and influential crowd he had gathered. He

took a last mouthful of mead, before standing and setting off the warrior's greeting of crashing these tables with their fists or their wooden beer logs. This loud, syncopated tempo sounded like the marching of a great host of giants in this hall and Caswallawn smiled, holding up his hands and bowing his head in acknowledgement. His spirit rose now in response, his gaze settling on his honoured relatives through the moving swirls of smoke. Ensconced on the front rows of benched tables and down to his right, Lludd and his huge warrior son Afalach were smiling up at him, both clattering their table with their beer logs. The sword champion of all Prydein; his esteemed brother Nynniaw along with *his* son, the renown warrior-dewin Prince Gwerdded were doing the same, sitting across the same big table. Caswallawn nodded his thanks down to them for their support, especially thrilled at Nynniaw's attendance. Two huge banners were arrayed behind this august group of Khumric royals, and the *war-hammer* of the Gorddoficau shared the right-hand wall with the snaking *red-dragons* of their Essyllwyr, and these fierce but familiar banners gave him great comfort. This group of tables had been stared at all evening and throughout the feasting, as the sons of Beli Mawr and all the Khumric gŵyrd were by far the most talked about people in every nation across this great country. They represented the mother of Prydein herself, and their presence here added to the vital importance of this war council. Their clothes and accoutrements were among the finest anyone here had seen, and they exuded influence and wealth from every pore with the languid and laidback ease of the truly powerful. The tip-hungry gaggle of arwein and menestr which flocked around them told their own tale. Their furs were rare, and their clothes tailored, revealing bright and heavy torcs and other marvellous and eye-catching pieces of jewellery, all of which would occasionally catch the light from the torches around this hall and sparkle like dancing rainbows over water. Only the wealthy mining lords of Dufnonia or the cattle barons of Durotryga could come close to the astounding wealth of these lords from the mother country, but they had none of these impressive warriors' elan, nor did they possess a fraction of their natural and imperious elegance. Many envious whispers flitted

around this gathering, especially in regard to the gleaming and hugely expensive, luxurious and custom-made shoes and boots the Khumry wore, as Brythons were ever appreciative of good footwear.

Caswallawn was as aware of this momentous gathering of his family bloodline as everyone else in this hall, as his powerful family triad had been made this night. Three of *the red dragons of Prydein* were here assembled, as were the rest of the most powerful people of these islands and it made a big difference. A huge gathering of arch-druids also attended from necessity, and all this was being personally supervised by the infamous and terrifying brif-druid of all Prydein; HênDdu. The inexperienced present were agog and nervous as with all these legends present in this great hall, absolutely anything could happen this tense and portentous night. Thus supported, Caswallawn looked around at the assembled warriors and nobles before him, nodding here and there to old comrades and the princes and gŵyrd of the assembled Houses of his Brythonau Dde. Caswallawn's gaze fell on young Prince Epyll of his southern neighbours; the Atrebatau, and he forced an easy smile. That young Belgic aristocrat ruled Atrebata jointly with his absent brother and in his exiled father Commios' absence. That young and fashionably dressed prince remained cool and impassive when their eyes met, but he bowed his head respectfully to Caswallawn, nonetheless. Caswallawn's gaze strayed from these agreeable vassals then, to the left-hand wall of his great hall and to the gathering of rebellious warriors and princes of monarch-less Trinobanta with their surly champions, all arrayed around their crude and hand drawn banners. They were not arrayed below the glorious and ruling Trinobantan flag of the late Dunfallawn this night, with its memorable, beautifully gold embroidered triple-lobed triskele cygil, as they had come here under the minor and home-made banners of their own 'Belgic Alliance'. Caswallawn felt the hatred in the hard eyes that stared their challenge back at him from this already rowdy quarter, and he tactfully looked away, taking a deep breath.

“Our revered priests, honoured kings, princes, all their valiant gŵyrd and nobles of Lloegr, Khumry and the rest of Prydein. My esteemed visitors, my honoured guests, neighbours and my combrogi from far and wide, you are all very much welcome in my humble caer.” He bowed forwards again, to no one in particular and ignored the rumblings to his left at this introduction and welcome. “No one need ask why we are gathered here, as we are all aware of the pitiless happenings in Gallia. “Indeed, there are some here tonight who have personally witnessed the treacherous cruelty of General Gaius Julius Caesar of Rome!” He told them plainly once he had stood upright again, pausing as the grumble of the hated name passed through this packed hall like a vengeful ghost. “Our brother Llefelys and our beloved nephew Lleu are fighting his dread soldiers as we speak in Gwened!” He said loudly, nodding at the ‘hoo-hooing’ and the clapping of his family members, an applause which was swollen by the cheering of the crowd, except for the lefthand wall of course which remained studiously quiet at this already well-known bit of news. That Trinobantan rebel group was scrutinised then, by some hard eyes from these Khumric tables and many others too. Caswallawn ignored them for the time being and held his hands up for order.

“I am too inclined to believe that the bastard wolf of Rome will venture north to our shores at the end of this summer, and it is in this regard that you have all been summoned here to this pivotal crychiad. You must all swear your blood-oaths to me and to the rest of Prydein, and then together we must form this necessary and demanded alliance!” He told them powerfully, and although most of his guests cheered at this and began banging their tables again, a roar of dissent came from the Trinobantau to his left, their revolt flaring hotly into the open. The stressed word *demanded* seemed to be the catalyst, and their anger flamed now like a field fire in midsummer. Caswallawn turned to face them, the colour rising up his muscular neck apace with his escalating temper. Those three rebellious tribes of Trinobanta were the northern tribes who had allied to the burly King Ochor, warden ruler of DunCamulo

and who seemed to be their leader, as the two princes and another minor king arrayed around those tables all seemed to defer to him.

Two decades ago, and with the young Prince Afarwy away training to become Androgeus the ambassador, Ochor had been allowed to run Trinobanta's largest fortress, but only by swearing undying loyalty and fealty to the late Dunfallawn, who had always preferred the more southerly, less utilitarian edifice of DunCelmer. Ochor seemed to think he ran all Trinobanta now in the uncertain vacuum of a vacant throne and being in possession of the capital caer had clearly bolstered this belief over the years. His northern Trinobantau were all shouting their protest now, with the usual amount of ridicule and insult interjected into any combrogi's protest. Caswallawn held the gaze of the Belgic King Ochor and used every ounce of his power to hold it to his gimlet eyes. As Caswallawn took in the florid face and the slightly unfocused gaze, he realised that this arrogantly slouching rogue had been over-enjoying his mead, and he snarled at the man then, his tact vanishing.

"It is no request Ochor, it is a demand! A *Hawl!*" He roared this at him from the dais, and the Belgic faction exploded in furious protest once more in response, missing completely the line of tall and broad, armed men who moved along the wall toward them from both directions. "Hawl! Hawl! Hawl!" Came the powerful chanting from the Khumric tables, and this supporting call for the 'demand' was taken up by the rest of the allied Houses. Logs began to crash loudly on tables again to this chanting, and Caswallawn felt a light touch on his right shoulder then amid this bedlam. He turned and bowed deeply to HênDdu, who now took his place at the centre of this dais, with his brow shining and his white gown and gold collar dazzling. The brif-druid of Prydein drew himself up to his full, impressive height and stared down his long aristocratic nose with a scowl at the still demonstrating Belgic tribesmen. He gave them their head for the moment, but the rest of the hall had fallen into a nervous silence at his appearance. As the slow realisation of just who it was awaiting their respect, and the surrounding silence broke in on their somewhat

inebriated anger, the rude noise that came from their tables petered out too, to a sibilant but truculent murmuring. The northern Trinobantau retook their seats, and all wide eyes in this hall were on the tall and grave figure of HênDdu at that moment.

“We must be united.” This regal druid said simply then and in his vibrating voice, his face a stern mask as he glowered at the gathering before him.

“We must be united if we are to repel the Romans, who will come to our southern shores soon after Lughnas as our honoured uati have confirmed.” He told them, leaving no one present in doubt as to his declaration of their divinations. “None in Prydein should be foolish or arrogant enough to believe that Caesar can be subdued without this crucial alliance, as our decimated combrogi in Gallia will testify to his competence in all matters martial. Many of their ancient and honourable Houses have been lost forever to his murderous ambitions!” He added sombrely. “We know he has been summoned back to Rome by his senate, but the wolf knows all is lost if he returns now, as senatorial charges and his crippling debts await him there like the guilty carrion crow of his greed, and....”

“Sue for peace before he comes! He will listen, and he still has much gold!” King Ochor shouted out then, spittle flying wildly from his wet lips as he carelessly interrupted HênDdu.

There was a sharp intake of breath taken by many at this unforgivable outburst, and a nervous silence fell on Caswallawn’s great hall. The scowl that twisted the prime druid’s face at this momentous disrespect was a ferocious one, but he turned quickly to forestall the *Pencampwr Prydeinig*, as Nynniaw had stood at this grave insult to him, his terrible, dragon like war face emerging. That northern Gorddofican king; the champion of all Prydein and a joint leader of the infamous ‘fire of the druids’ was striding toward Ochor drawing his dagger, and his brutal face was twisted with the intended murder glowing in his red heart. His family of Khumric lords were ominously assembling behind him revealing their own sharp steel, and the same dread intentions were mirrored on their harsh warfaces. The druid

had to hop off the dais to stand before them with his hands raised, commanding their obedience, as he knew well their fury at such insubordination and that their answer to it was almost always written in blood. If he did nothing, this crychiad would be awash with it. In the face of such unapproachable power however, these Khumric kings had no real option but to return to their tables, but they growled like wolves with their anger, all the way back to their banners. As they retook their seats, their hard eyes shot shards of Khumric flint across the hall at those rebels in dire and final warning. There were some very ominous rumblings amongst the Brythonic gŵyrd at Ochor's base statement and in support of the aroused Khumric aristocracy. Many a scornful look was levelled then at this clearly drunken Belgic king, who in all their opinions had just as clearly disgraced himself.

The arch-druid Drem nodded to someone then among the dozen armed guards who lined the far wall. These were all dressed in Gorddofic tabards and with their *flaming war-hammer* cygils proclaiming the military might of the druids. These big men, armed with long and wicked looking pikes finished their erstwhile movement of containment, coming to surround this faction of the Trinobantau, and their protestations grew again, yelling their outrage and alarm at this sudden development. In the midst of this bedlam of angry shout and counter-shout, an arwein approached Caswallawn from behind his huge and dazzling throne to whisper something in his ear, and the king's eyes flashed at the news. His glittering eyes moved then and across the room to his left, back toward the source of the dispute, and he caught the eye of Ochor once more. The minor king in charge of DunCamulo snarled back at him through the smoke, but Caswallawn looked then to Ochor's left and at the slimmer, younger face of Prince Aracorn of DunErb: a close eastern neighbour. A quizzical look softened that Belgic prince's pinched face at that moment, in response perhaps to the smug, satisfied look on Caswallawn's.

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An owl hooted from somewhere in the dark, and the outpost guard turned his head at the sound, toward the forest's edge behind him. He never saw the arrow that streaked out from the blackness to *thunk* solidly into the front of his skull. As his eyeballs rolled upwards towards it, this dead sentry fell back to the turf without a sound. There was no moon, and the heavy cloud cover in this night sky had obliterated all the stars too. A guard's vision was compromised for at least half an hour after coming out from a well-lit thatch and until his night sight kicked in fully. This fact had eased the swift death of this guard and his three newly arrived compatriots, positioned at the other three points of the compass around this hilltop dun that towered over them. The caer's guard shift had just changed, and these, as yet unawake and properly sighted lookouts had all died without a sound.

A pair of hard, amber eyes surveyed this action and the unfamiliar caer behind it from the fringes of this forest to its north, and from a high shelf in the bedrock which stepped up at this forest's edge. Roughly two hundred reeds from that dark and brooding hilltop dun, this long finger of granite outcrop reached south toward it, giving a much better outlook of its layout and defences, and its outpost guard had just been silently killed to give this obvious leader this commanding viewpoint. The snarling face of a sharp toothed, black fox hung over this warrior's head, with its ears pinned back for fighting and the back legs of its cured body wrapped around this warrior's waist, fastened with a silver clasp. The fox's forelegs formed a chinstrap, and the tip of its bushy black tail hung below the man's waist. This broad, powerful looking warrior crouching on one knee at this forest's edge was clearly the leader of these two hundred, highly trained men he had brought here, and not a shred of mercy was revealed in his lifeless and pale eyes. None could be found either in his harsh and uncompromising features as he surveyed the deeply shadowed fortress before him.

They had all tracked and found their own rare, black fox when they had become men of this elite Demeta force, having to fight the wild tribesmen

who guarded them single handed, totally naked and with whatever weapon they could craft with just a small flint knife. Those who survived this almost suicidal ordeal all wore their hard-earned tails and fox fur armbands with immense pride. These simple scraps of black fur were their badges of honour within their ancient military House, and they had all sweated blood and risked their lives terribly to gain them. Their mantles were a dark weave, and their round shields were black with pitch, their faces bearing the same black streaks of charcoal and soot. These well-travelled warriors crouched behind their Nêr Galwyn ap Gair, the short but immensely capable man who had led them here, all the way from Demeta. Ten of his best, vassal *shadow-stalkers* had entered that silent and dark fortress some time ago using a tall timber ladder, and Galwyn watched for any sign of their success from under the black fox of command. This black fox strapped to his head and shoulders looked out above him and whose glassy eyes stared out across the same two hundred reeds of waste ground before the distant caer, and it too seemed to appraise the tall, arched northern gate that sat atop a long flight of stone steps leading up to it. This long stairway snaked up the side of that hill and over the double ring of ditches to a small and walled courtyard balcony, which probably served as a high waiting yard for any callers to that rear tradesman's entrance. This nêr's amber eyes, and those of his talisman scanned the tops of those battlements again from this elevated position, and both their gazes ventured beyond this elevated position to the vast swathes of rich farmland which this region was blessed with, and which surrounded this hillfort of the Western Trinobantau. Galwyn's ghostly long scouts had just informed him that there were few other strongholds nearby which could offer timely support to this caer, and that the whole territory was soft, full of farmsteads and communities rather than fortresses and warriors. His men had all admired their patron's choice, and all were agreed that it was ripe for the taking, like a dark and juicy plum.

DunErb and its surrounding communities had been part of Casufelawny many generations ago, but that had changed when it had been taken by

force by the late King Dunfallawn's grandfather. This long annexed outward bulge in Casufelawny's eastern border and the land around this dark caer had never really been incorporated fully into Trinobanta, and even the people who lived here had always felt differently. Its cultural differences from the central lands of Trinobanta were apparent, and the locals with their unique dialect here had remained more *Casufel* than *Trino* even to this day. This part of the border had been fluid for many centuries, and it would reform again this night with violence and a mercenary force. Unknown to the sleeping werrin of this whole pastoral region, those that survived would once again become citizens of Casufelawny.

That huge but distant oak door set in its stone arched frame and at the top of that long flight of stairs was lit by a torch to either side in its becket. The monstrous black shadows around this pedestrian gate and the stone balcony around it grew and danced as their flames flickered in the wind. These invisible and ever watchful, silent killers crouching around their leader knew that the huge double gates atop the ramp of the western face of this caer were firmly shut. Even though they could only see the very bottom of that long, paved ramp from this part of the forest, they could see well enough that there were few lights visible inside the fortress, and that it was locked down and as silent as the grave, with but a handful of sleepy guards patrolling the battlements.

Nêr Galwyn and his stuffed fox both looked up to the sky again to get a rough idea of the time, but this dark night sky was still smothered with even darker clouds, and the parentheses that framed Galwyn's mouth deepened, being the only outward sign of his mounting frustration. A movement snapped his focus back up to that high courtyard door then as it opened slowly, and the figure of a man appeared in the moving, dancing glow of the torches to either side. Galwyn knew by the size and shape of this man that it was his *rhingyll* Killan, and that 'sergeant' raised his right arm, giving the clear and familiar signal before repeating the same signal with his left. Galwyn grunted with the release of his tension. His man

Killan then doused both torches at that distant rear entrance, plunging the high gateway and its steep approaches into darkness. Galwyn stood then without a word and began to trot in a low crouch down this featureless, rubble strewn slope and across the rough, tussocked ground toward the bottom step of that long flight of worn steps ahead. His men followed swiftly and silently behind him, moving lithe and low like the sinuous black hounds of Lug himself, raised to this world for the darkest of deeds. The elite shadow-stalkers of the Wythonau had already taken care of the sleepy guards patrolling the battlements, and in a few short minutes, all their black fox warrior comrades had swarmed up the steps to charge through the now unguarded door and to flood into the dun.

An owl hooted a prophetic rebuke from the nearby forest, but nonetheless and under this starless sky, the real killing began.

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The voices of dissent were still coming from the tables of the Trinobantau alliance, but in low grumblings now, and the Khumric royals of Caswallawn's family were all standing and glaring at those rowdy belligerents, held back temporarily by holy orders. The rebels against the far wall were now surrounded by naked steel, and they fell silent. HênDdu looked at them thus restrained, and once again he caught the eye of their leader; the vassal and petty king Ochor.

"Bring forth the next man who interrupts me." He said quietly to the nêr of the Gorddofican guards, but every person in this great stone hall heard it, and Ochor sat down again heavily, as did his countrymen. After long moments, HênDdu turned his attention back to the large assembly crowding this great hall.

"Combrogil!" He began again loudly, using his power to return their focus to him. "Caesar cannot yet return to Rome with any dignity and perhaps grasp one more chance to redeem himself in the eyes of his senate, as he must now show these deeply corrupted individuals that he will indeed conquer Prydein as simply as he did Gallia." This brif-druid told them

seriously, waiting as these words of immutable wisdom sunk in, a bony finger pointing to the southern coast. “In support of this ludicrous claim, the wolf of Rome will need to return with his ships laden with our gold and our silver, many slaves and hostages from our werrin, and the dishonoured cygils of as many tribes as he can subdue or coerce. It is known to all that some cowardly Houses have already had delegated meetings with Caesar and have already offered him their cygils along with their vassal subordination. In doing this they would subject us all to the same shameful servitude!” HênDdu accused savagely, and he had to pause here as the crowd erupted with voluble outrage at this indictment. The druid’s accusing gaze had returned to the Belgic dissenters, now isolated and surrounded by the Gorddofican guardsmen, and a few logs of beer were hurled across the room at those rebels along with many dark curses and threats. HênDdu ignored it and called for order again before continuing strongly. “This unconscionable surrender and capitulation will not be allowed to spread, and you are all here to be *told* your Gods-sworn future and to be *shown* your destiny. I and my holy order care less which House you represent, as I represent Arglwydd Prydein herself and she is far older than anything you stand for here tonight. It is her sacred desire that we unite to keep the Roman wolf from her skirts.” He commanded them imperiously, and despite his previous demand, an anonymous shout came from within the encircled group of Trinobantau.

“Politics and lies!”

It was not clear which one of them had yelled this, but all wide eyes in this now deathly silent hall swung back across to look at those reckless dissenters with raised eyebrows. Chairs scraped stone again as the Khumry regained their feet and sharp steel glittered once more in their fists, but one hand from the druid again forestalled their murderous advance, but only just.

“Bring forth their leaders!” HênDdu commanded sharply, his face twisted now with a barely controlled outrage. The guards manhandled King Ochor

and his three vassal noblemen out into the space before the raised dais, and who looked none too pleased at this turn of events.

The Khumry were on their feet howling their rage, and there were hisses and murderous grumblings aimed at these men along with a few more beer-trailing logs as these four noblemen were brought forward and at the sharp tips of levelled pikes. The brif-druid stepped down from the dais then, and he approached these men with an ominous step. "Kneel." He said simply, but none complied swiftly enough, and so they were struck at the back of their knees by the guards and forced to kneel before Prydein's great and powerful druid. HênDdu turned to King Ochor then, who was furious at such treatment and clearly half-drunk. "The treachery you claim is real enough Ochor, but it is yours and your vassal's, and was done many weeks ago when you sent your secret emissaries to Gallia to meet the cur Caesar at Alesia. Did you think your covert and cowardly pleas would go unnoticed or unremarked Ochor ap Felan?" AurArian asked him scornfully. "Nothing escapes the gaze of my order as my eyes are everywhere, in every bird and in every animal abroad. The duplicitous wolf of Rome may think he has your cygils in his hand, as do you, but you are all mistaken!" He snarled down at the four of them. "This isn't Gallia, this is Prydein, the very birthplace of your religion, and that Roman rogue holds nothing but the debased picture symbols of your Houses. I hold your true cygils!" He told these kneeling Belgic nobles with a growl, closing the caged fingers of his right hand into a fist in a symbolic display. "I, who represent Arglwydd Prydein and all her Gods, I hold your cygils as I hold your lives and your very souls along with every one of your immigrant families', and it is I who also holds ownership of all the lands which you have been custodians of these past few years!" This angry druid snarled at them, staring at these four Belgic nobles for long moments as if he was coldly deliberating their future, as he most surely was. HênDdu moved to stand in front of their leader. "I will give you all this one final opportunity." He told this minor king on his knees and at his feet. "Swear your blood-oath now, to me and to all the Houses of Prydein here represented, that you will join our alliance with a true heart and assist us in repelling the

Roman wolf or perish here and now in this world!" HênDdu offered Ochor seriously. "You know if Afarwy decides to walk against the sun you will all have to join our alliance anyway, as his views are no secret. So, swear the oath Ochor!" He added finally, unsheathing a stunning Brythonic honour dagger from behind his back and pointing it at Ochor, leaving room for not one scintilla of doubt to remain as to the outcome of refusal. The king did not even blink, as although inebriated and on his knees, in public, his honour and his bri were far more important to him than his life, especially when naked steel had been levelled at him, and he grimaced at HênDdu then, a measure of the man's wild character showing still in his bloodshot eyes.

"We no longer answer to the empty throne of Trinobanta druid, having rescinded our vassal status, and we are here in our own interests and on our own authority." Ochor growled back his defiance. "Prince Afarwy can do as he pleases, as no more will the people of northern Trinobanta be his battle-fodder, nor will we be his unpaid workforce and subordinate subjects." Ochor spat his bile out, baring his throat then and craning his neck recklessly in his mead-fuelled anger. "So here druid, cut my throat and take my life, for I will not be drawn into your folly by threats, nor by any other means. General Caesar has my bond and...." Ochor's words were abruptly cut off, as AurArian Aruchel without a moment's hesitation leaned forward to accept the man's proposal.

HênDdu slashed the man's throat open smoothly from ear to ear and with a consummate ease, born of repetitive practice and a desire to perfect the move. His long experience at this killing stroke prompted him to step aside quickly, as Ochor's throat gaped below his surprised face and a flood of Belgic royal blood gushed hotly out onto the flagstones. The sound was like a splashing waterfall in a stream, punctuated only by a single grunt from Ochor. A loud murmur broke from these massed onlookers then, but it was instantly drowned out by the howls of outrage from the lefthand wall as their leader King Ochor ap Felan fell forwards with a wet slap and into his own widening pool of steaming blood, his feet

kicking wildly. HênDdu ignored the swelling noise around him and stepped up to the next man Prince Aracorn, and he held the bloodied blade under his chin, giving him the same simple but stark choice. The hot and wet blood had softened the starch in these Belgic vassals however, and their rebellion ostensibly died on the smiling Caswallawn's cold and bloody flagstones along with its leader King Ochor. Prince Duboric of CaerHerlaw, King Llwyd of CaerBera and Prince Aracorn of DunErb; the three minor royals remaining all bowed their heads to the inevitable, acceding to HênDdu's *Hawl*, and the great hall was suddenly filled with a cheering multitude. Two stewards dragged the dead king's body away as another sprinkled sawdust on the trail of his spilled blood, and the three reprieved and pale faced nobles retook their places among their subdued warriors and under their crude and now limp looking banners.

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The terrible, blood curdling screaming tore the silence of this dark night asunder, but it was far too late to do anybody any good. The off-duty guards had all died in their sleep and in their barrack beds with their throats cut, and all the stewards, the arwein and squires had been next. These black fox warriors were to a man experts at the dark arts of insidious assault and anonymous assassination, especially the shield less *shadow-stalkers* of the wild Wythonau among them. Just minutes ago, they had broken into the absent Prince Aracorn's royal chambers like a black, death carrying swarm. The prince's two personal guards had put up a tremendous fight, killing seven of the smaller black fox warriors before they were subdued, but the royal family were then trapped at the back of the royal bed chamber. Prince Aracorn's teenage son had stood before his family and had valiantly held back two of the smiling, black swathed Demeta invaders with his heirloom sword, but this young aristocrat fell from an expertly thrown dagger to his throat by a shadow-stalker in the doorway. That brave boy then died gurgling on his parent's bedroom rug as his screaming mother and his sisters were quickly put to the sword around him.

People began awaking to the horror that was taking place in their fortress, but all too soon any real defensive threat they could mount against their attackers had been effectively eliminated. All the warriors of this fortress defended their chambers, corners and corridors furiously in unconnected groups but were not in a single body of men guided by an experienced leader, and so, they were skilfully and efficiently slain without a word spoken by these invaders, as there had been nothing on their part to say. They were here for one thing only; the death of all within this great dun. The survivors; the old men, the civilian women and all the children who lived within these high walls were then herded together outside and into one corner of the central parade ground. There, they were slaughtered by a grim-faced circle of these merciless sword and spearmen who did not even flinch at this profiteering bloodshed, as all were highly experienced in the taking of human life and it meant little to them. The ruthless black fox warriors of Demeta carved through these screaming innocents with as little thought as a farmer scythes through his ripe crop under *Alban Elfed*; the late and merciless light of the Autumn Equinox. Within the hour, these blood-spattered butchers were manning the palisaded battlements of DunErb and chatting happily among themselves as their elite Wythonau comrades guarded the strong room in the keep below. Every living thing found inside this dark fortress had been dragged out to the quadrangle and slaughtered like a sacrificial goat, and even the dogs had fled in terror. Their Demetau leader Nêr Galwyn released two messenger pigeons from their willow cages, his shoulders relaxing a little at their fluttering launch into flight and as the first part of his mission was successfully completed. All he had to do now was to hold DunErb until relieved by Caswallawn's men, when he would also receive the balance of payment, whenever that would be.

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The unquestionable power of Prydein, HênDdu retook the dais then, his gown bloodied and looking a little dishevelled, but his anger seemed to be

diminishing. Turning his long, gaunt but unflinching face once more to this crowd of warriors before him, order was quickly restored.

“I tell you honoured nobles and warriors that I fear these Italian braggarts, for they are Prydein’s greatest enemy and seek only to destroy us!”

HênDdu brought them back to him in his powerful voice, ignoring the rank metallic smell of freshly spilled blood near the dais which the sprinkled sawdust did nothing to mask. The vibration in his dread voice had gone, as the creature which normally dwelt in the druid’s larynx was obviously sleeping. “They are merciless to all who oppose them but have been especially cruel to our Galliad combrogi, and *Keltoi* everywhere as they wrongly call our races. Although distant cousins perhaps, we Brythons know that we are a separate people to those Celtic and Galliad families on that great continent across the Môr Udd, and we always have been. It is only Rome’s ignorance which throws us all in the same sack. The truth is, those Romans have never forgotten their shaming by the cunning of our Brennus all those years ago, and the weight of his mighty sword still pricks them!” He offered this with a pleased, expectant smile. The priests and the nobles around him chuckled at this historic reference, but the vast and silent majority in this hall were oblivious to the druid’s historical wisdom. HênDdu looked down his long nose at the rows of quiet, uninformed and unresponsive faces before him with disappointment, and he gave them all a condescending sniff before continuing strongly.

“Anyway, their deeply corrupted priests demand daily offerings to their Gods but take possession of the offerings themselves! It has become nothing more than a squalid business to them; a base trade. Most of their werrin’s pleas are honourless and are those of revenge or malice anyway, and what do they get in return? Nothing but some mumbled and meaningless platitudes. Here in Prydein, your druid priests demand no payment for the constant and irreplaceable services we deliver, as you all know. All our offerings are made to the Gods of Prydein themselves, and no sane Brython would dare plunder a place of sacrifice, from fear of a lost soul and the worst death imaginable!” Many heads were nodding at this wisdom and the well-known truth in the druid’s plain and clearly heard

words. “Your druids do so much, not just for the nobles and the warrior-class but for the ordinary people of this land, the Gods-blessed werrin of Prydein. We protect you and we speak for you, we give you laws to abide by and a proper order to your lives. We druids of Prydein are the very substance that keeps our communities together.” He told them honestly in his now familiar voice, and there were still many heads nodding in agreement. “The Romans take everything and offer nothing but the chains of slavery or the cross of woe in return. They even subject their own werrin to public execution in their arenas, by running the gauntlet of whips, or being torn apart by wild beasts, or by roasting them in great iron chairs so that they choke on the stench of their own cooking flesh!” The druid curled his lip at his own words, scowling hatefully at his own stark vision. There were some shocked faces in the crowd at the barbarism of Rome, but many were clearly impressed as HênDdu pressed on remorselessly.

“We cannot let these merciless beasts gain one foothold in Prydein, or all will be lost! Now honourable Prydeinig, swear your oaths of unity to me and to Arglwydd Prydein!” He finished strongly, and the response from all these people was loud and it was supportive.

Amid the shouting, the cheering and the loud banging of beer logs, the Brythonau Dde reached their concord, and the blood-oaths were there sworn by the great southern lords on their knees and on their sacred swords. They swore loudly and with great passion to uphold this fledgling alliance and to emulate their northern lords. Kneeling before Caswallawn on his sunburst throne, these animated senior warriors further swore to make the public and sacred declaration of *undeb* this coming Lughnas as so desired by their priesthood, and to fight together against a common enemy for the first time in their known history. Some busy royals had left immediately this huge crychiad had ended, including the deflated nobles and the Belgic gŵyrd of the northern Trinobantau, but not before Prince Aracorn of DunErb had taken one final, worried look at their expansive and sharply smiling host slouching on his glittering throne. It was instinct

or foreboding he was not quite sure which, but there had been something very troubling in Caswallawn's attitude toward him at the end of this war council and it worried him.

Many leading Brythons had stayed behind following the mass exodus of civilians from CaerGwlyb and had formed big knots of leaders and senior Brythonic warriors in this now spacious great hall, all talking earnestly about their preparations for this looming war with the Romans. A familiar arwein approached the dais quietly and from behind the golden throne, bending to whisper in Caswallawn's ear again, and the king of the Brythonau Dde's sharklike smile broadened. Stepping down and sharing this news quietly with his family members at the front tables, they smiled back in congratulation for his more *personal* successes this night, and the inscrutable aristocracy of Khumry raised a toast to his laudable ambitions. Shocking news arrived by messenger to Caswallawn's court just a few minutes later, and on hearing this report of an appalling and unprovoked attack on his close eastern neighbours, Caswallawn publicly declared his outrage to his unreadable family members and whomever was left in his great hall to listen, making a great performance of calling out his guard.

A little later, roughly an hour after five hundred of Casufelawny's *bronze-shield* warriors had noisily departed in darkness and from the far eastern gates, a dark-mantled and solitary rider left the caer quietly through another servants' gate, following that overt relief force initially but finally taking more direct and hidden routes. This shadowy figure following Caswallawn's troops of acquisition dressed very differently from the norm, mostly in black fur and leather and with tiny white bones woven into his long black hair and his beard. His accoutrements were highly unusual too, as this uncommon individual was one of the *Ailyllwr*, a shape-shifting tracker of notorious reputation, and he was in his element. Abandoning the wide and unmistakeable spoor of Caswallawn's riders, this silent, acutely aware and observant tracker of old legend took the lane northeast, which was the same drover's lane which the reduced Trinobanta alliance had taken a little earlier. This ultimate, silent hunter

set off easily behind them for the sixty-mile journey, thoughtlessly following their bold tracks in the starlight and toward the distant hills rising ominously in the eastern darkness.



Chapter Eleven.

Sleep had forsaken Cadwy. He had tossed and turned throughout the dark early hours of this morning as his mind just could not encompass the portentous happenings in his life. All the things that had happened to him this summer tumbled through his mind, and he felt as though he was riding a colossal wave in a coracle without a *rod/* and with little if any control, but inexplicably, in a good way. Cadwy had returned north to DunAlclwyd with his cyfail, to form and to take command of a large force of four cavalry officers and one hundred cavalrymen, who would together form the honour guard tomorrow for King Ederus and his army's approach into Albion and with Cadwy at the head. Once joined, this vast twin host will move south like an unstoppable landslide into Albion, arriving at DunAlclwyd, and Cadwy's duty included overseeing this momentous ritual passing of the limit at midnight tonight when he would officially represent Cridas in every way.

It was clear to all his friends that something was happening to their prince and oath sworn warlord in these last weeks of summer, and it was entirely marvellous. It seemed as though he had suddenly matured overnight, and Cadwy's normally ebullient self-confidence was sky-high. The way he commanded the captains and the other leaders around him had many officers looking at each other in pleased surprise. All could see the new set to this prince's shoulders, but it was the purposeful way he walked now too which marked him out as a man with new authority. Even old soldiers looked on with pride, as this was clearly no boyish enthusiasm nor was it the misguided arrogance of a wealthy prince. This was an entirely adult ferocity of focus and a new attitude of singular purpose which had come from somewhere in the last few days, and many thought the young Selgofan aristocrat had been spirit touched. Apart from the obvious

maturity, Cadwy looked a physically changed man suddenly too, and seemed a shade taller and even broader to many.

Privately, Cadwy had just been invested with the sworn trust and the respect of his father when he had given him the privilege of leading the honour guard tonight, and as the 'Lord Guardian of the Honour of Albion'. This hugely honourable position of *Godebog yr Anrhydedd yr Albionau* was an important one with many responsibilities in the normal calendar of ceremonial events, but to lead the nation's honour guard for this historic and auspicious occasion had come as a complete shock to Cadwy. It had made his chest swell with pride, but he had not realised at the time that the position of principal; the *Godebog* of Albion's national honour guard had always been held by no less a man than a landed tumon of the 1st order. Cadwy's mouth had almost fallen open as Cridas proffered and bestowed upon him the titles of both Honourable *Brif-Siryff y Gorllewin* of Selgofa and Lord Tumon of Bidog, giving him the rule and governance of a new Selgofan baronetcy and principality. It was a region in the heartlands of north-western Selgofa which encompassed large tracts of healthy farmland, and a busy market town had been established in its principal town of Draenwen within a fine bend in the afon Clwyd as it wound its way through this rich fiefdom, and it had become his. Cadwy could soon wear the solid gold ring of the landed Baron, and he had stood stunned in his father's private lodge and with his heart thumping in his chest when Cridas had shown him the fabulous ring and his own banner; the 'crossed boar-tusk over hawthorn' cygil of Prince Cadwy ap Cridas. He was also to become *Head Sheriff* of the western region of Selgofa, encompassing his new tumony of Bidog and its busy market tref of Draenwen. His father's cleverness had been truly revealed with the additional title of 'Head Sheriff of Selgofa West', a broad region around his new fiefdom and which position also gave him military control of the larger, surrounding territory to the west of Fro Twaid Uchaf. This gave him control of a much larger purse than Draenwen could provide alone initially, and which would be very welcome in the early stages, but more vitally, it gave Cadwy's new tumony of Bidog ample room to change and to expand from an enviable

territory with fantastic natural resources and much potential, into a large, useful and wealthy principeddom. The office of Head Sheriff also gave him the wider regional, military authority to enforce those changes should the need ever arise, and with an indentured, fully equipped cavalry in support, Cadwy's future had been literally set for life by his father.

Cridas had pointed out the boundaries and the mountain range of Fro Twaid Uchaf to the east above Bidog on a buckskin scored with a red-hot blade, and although crudely drawn, the map had given him the approximate boundaries of that large tract of land which incredibly had become his. His father had described fine, mixed arable land in a wide expanse of beautiful pastures, and a number of large farms, all surrounded by lush hills and dense forest. Leading down through a deep valley and beside a small but attractive, stream-fed lake lay the main north-south road in and out of the region. Tref Draenwen sits prettily alongside that riverine oasis, and in the very western corner of northern Selgofa which sits tight to the nearby open Damnonian border. From this almost non-existent border between these two allied kingdoms, it is but a day's ride further to the coast and to the familiar and oft visited DunAlclwyd and the vassal caer of Prince Berwyn. Young Berwyn is one of Cadwy's closest friends, and so the location of his new tumony could not have been more perfect. He had looked wide eyed at this father as he described the soil around it as 'rich, and as dark as roasted acorns', and which the farmers there praised for its quality, growing huge and healthy crops season after season in its earthy embrace and with very little dunging. Cridas had reminded Cadwy of a childhood expedition there, to the handfasting of a royal uncle in the territory, and he had listened to every word as his tad described a pair of fortresses which had been built long ago to either end of the growing tref of Draenwen. The blessed river Clwyd curved in a beautiful bend around the town and its two caers, running through the heart of that agreeable land and offering its farmers ample and crucial irrigation. Due to its advantageous location near to one of northern Prydein's eleven most sacred crossroads, that industrious and burgeoning little town was blessed with many visitors each day, but it

became packed to the wattles on the seasonal festivals when it was a veritable *reaper* of wealth. That cattle filled and grain rich land would produce a vast wealth for Cadwy over the coming years if his life lessons had been well learned and if he governs wisely. This stunning endorsement from his father making him a landed and listed tumon in his own right, with his own cygil and soon a vassal mounted force of his own had been beyond his wildest dreams. Since then, he had striven to conjure up childhood memories of his visit to the lush valleys and the green hills of Bidog but could not do it for the life of him. It had been a totally unexpected gift, and his father had said simply; 'Let us see Ederus reject your proposal now my son.' This he had spoken quietly in his ear as he slid the ring on his son's finger and found that it fitted his middle finger well enough. However, his official investiture was planned for the following evening and long before the great oath-swearing at Lughnas when the final part of their plan would come into play. That bold denouement to their planning will be acted out before the assembled hosts of all three northern nations and in a well-planned and precisely timed interruption to that great ceremony, so it was fraught with potential disaster. Cridas had shamelessly pulled many strings behind the scenes to have his son's claim held at precisely the right moment in that great oath-swearing to avert such a calamity, and Cadwy had been sworn to secrecy all summer. His obvious recent increase in stature and self-belief had not gone unnoticed by his aristocratic group of friends along with most of the werrin in Selgofa and wider Albion. Most of them had wrongly guessed that it had something to do with the Princess Eirwen of Galedon with whom he had been linked recently, due to the hottest rumours and the latest gossip on so many lips. Those same people had been forced to conclude that if the rumours had substance it must surely be just a dalliance, as if it was at all serious, that particular friendship was doomed to failure. Many of those gossipers had proposed that if Crown Prince Cadwy's judgement was so impaired as to court a princess of their old enemy, it was far more likely to bring him down than to raise him up. It was the ones closest to him who knew differently and who had noticed a change in his relationship with

King Cridas. His cyfail knew his all-powerful father to be the inspiration behind this obvious and personal coming of age but knew not the details. All had become clear on the night of the investiture, and which had been a private and secluded affair held within the royal family, their priests and Cadwy's cyfail. Last night in Cridas' great hall, Cadwy had been presented with his new future and the sacred armorials of his new House. He had stood beaming with a glowing face as Hefin led his cyfail in the applause and the following celebrations.

Cadwy had risen blearily with the first birdsong this morning, and he was now sweating heavily on Prince Berwyn's *maes y cledd*; the utterly familiar part of this practice ground reserved for single sword combat training. As he circled Turen ap Gamon; his languid, relaxed sword tutor and the pencampwr of Albion, the man seemed to know every move he was about to make a fraction before he did, and it infuriated him. It was not long until Turen dismissed him curtly as his mind was clearly elsewhere. Cadwy trotted off for a hot soapy bath and a deep massage before some food, and then he would dress in his new clothes of office once more, but this time for real. Ederus and the cream of Galedon's warriors would be heading south for the triple-hills of DunEil and his tad's capital ultimately and fittingly to make the first part of the triadic blood oath, as all Brythonic life has ever come in threes. It was here at DunAlclwyd; the 'Rock of the Brythons' that the first gathering would be made, as the 'great northern border' lay just east of this border *watch* fortress. First contact with the old enemy would be made by Cadwy and his men there at *ffin gogledd mawr*, and where the dreaded, druid-led opening of their ghost fences will take place at midnight tonight. The weight of these responsibilities began to make themselves felt in the tension around his neck and shoulders as he prepared himself for this momentous occasion, with his nervousness slowly building throughout the day.

Cadwy had been introduced to the enormous, beautiful horse just a few short weeks previously, and their relationship was still as new as one

could be between man and beast, which did nothing for his nerves. This had concerned Cadwy initially, as his treasured but ferocious warhorse Tywysog was entirely unsuitable to the peaceful, ceremonial requirements of this day as his name 'warrior-prince' suggested, and so, Cadwy had been forced to persevere these last weeks of summer with this purely ceremonial horse he had been given by the order. He was very glad now that he had, as Amr was a proud Epidian horse lord, and his glossy coat shone a stunning silver-grey under this starlight. Every eye was drawn to this magnificent horse and his stunning, highly unusual colouring. Even in the dark, Amr's glossy new black and silver tack seemed to emphasise his fabulous elderberry-wine colour, and his glorious silver-white mane seemed to glow in this impersonal, celestial glow. Cadwy felt very proud of his superb new mount tonight as he had discovered that Amr had the perfect stature and temperament needed for these ceremonial duties he had been destined for, from the moment these traits had been identified in him as a colt by the horse masters in DunAdda. This utterly beautiful horse under him was a stoic and unflappable character from a world-renowned blood stock, and Cadwy was beginning to understand him now and he Cadwy. A gentle touch with both knees spurred Amr onwards in his slow and specific, dignified walking manner with each foreleg held high for the briefest fraction of a moment, and this trained affectation gave him a ceremonial way and tempo of walking, making him the envy of all who beheld his regal beauty this night. These rare animals were considered among the very best horses Epidia produced and were much sought after. Amr proved why tonight, as rightly for the *Godebog yr Anrhydedd yr Albionau* he strutted proudly, and his immaculately groomed coat rippled in the light like liquid electrum as he stepped elegantly forward. His noble and beautiful head was held high, and he was simply magnificent as he led Albion north under a velvet dome of a bottomless black, and which had been carelessly strewn with endless swathes of glittering diamonds.

Bleddyn rode behind him to his right hand as Cadwy's pencampwr, and the huge young man with the florid face and uncontrollable hair growth was in close attendance. Pencampwr Bleddyn sat upright in the saddle of

his big bay mare, and he was taking the appointment of Cadwy's champion very seriously tonight, his eyes constantly scanning the crowds of werrin standing in the weeds and lining this normally uninhabited drover's lane for any threat to his lord. This long and dusty road had been spiked by thousands of roaring torches on either bank for this night, leading all the way up to that colossal barrier on the land dividing these two nations. The disused ditches behind these lines of tall torches the werrin stood before this historic night were full of brambles. The grass verges had encroached almost to the centre, and this abandoned old road was deeply rutted and potholed by the passing of uncountable cartwheels and cattle hooves, but none of these were recent as they all showed signs of great age or were overgrown. This long neglected, once primary route through the north of Prydein bent from east to north as it approached the disused head of this ancient road and which terminated at the great northern border. In physical form, this sealed border crossing was a stout timber barrier fronting the ghost-border itself, and this was made up of one of the two, half mile wide swathes of cleared land in the dense forest ahead of them which forms that mighty border. *Ffin gogledd mawr* has its mirror image in Galedon just over a mile away, and these two ghost-fences slice through this vast northern forest from east to west like twin, curving slash cuts from two ancient and giant swords, forever separating the Albionau from the hated Galedonau.

As the broad spread of cleared ground ahead of the distant ghost fence came into view, Cadwy halted, and he felt Hefin come up on his left hand as his new honour guard halted behind them. All were now in place, and their eyes were trained to the far side of this huge clearing and across to Albion's own ditch fronted ghost fence at the distant treeline. All here knew that the approaching Galedonian forces had breached their own ghost fence earlier, and now all eyes were focused on the far side of this half mile wide clearing, where lay the shadowed and mist wreathed edge of the great forest of Galedon. Two long lines of flaming torches continued from the still discernible limits of the neglected old road behind them, sweeping past them into a huge maes created by the druids at the head

of this now dead ended route, and this huge grassy space ahead was also lined with anxious werrin. This long avenue of roaring torches stretching before them had been erected by the druids and their stewards throughout the day, forming a broad avenue for Albion's duties this notable night. This flickering boulevard bulged in the centre roughly a hundred reeds ahead, curving outwards to make a vast circle before continuing as a brightly lit throughfare once more, and it stretched from Albion's position all the way to that dark forest's edge in the night shrouded distance. This tense Albion honour guard waited under the starlight, staring at the no-man's land ahead and which had been cleared of their own ghost fence at midnight just minutes previously by an army of priests and burly men, and the apprehension in them all could not be concealed as the moment approached.

Looking to his left and to the west down the broad tract carved through these trees, Cadwy could just see in the gloom and backlit by the low western stars, that there was a tall and wide expanse of wicker panelling newly erected roughly half a mile away and affixed to a long row of tall poles. Unseen, and behind this temporary screen in the darkness stood the continuation of a long line of truly ancient, pole mounted and north facing skulls that stretched all the way to the distant west coast. This tall barrier was the recently erected and sacred western terminal or gatepost of Albion's *adwy y derwydd*, and to Cadwy's right stretched the darker eastern avenue of their borderline, which was blocked in a similar manner with another large but temporary panel of wicker squares for this historic night. These physical terminals made the posts of the 'druid's gate' through the Albion ghost fence, and it was roughly a mile from physical and symbolic post to post across. The solid timber structure making the barrier across this old road had been disassembled many hours earlier, and its components were now stacked up in two great piles of timber to either side of that wide opening, casting their own huge angular and ominous looking shadows. It was Lughnas, the third season of the year and the season for warfare. The physical, the symbolic and the spiritual gates to Albion had all been thrown wide open as Brythonic life is ever a

triad, and every soul drawn here for this sacred event felt entirely vulnerable as the hour approached.

Cadwy turned in his saddle, nodded to Bleddyn and smiled, seeing his pencampwr's eyes glittering with emotion, and Bleddyn grinned back wolfishly, giving him a wink in return. The two officers of the 'Order of the Honour Keepers' behind Bleddyn and who led the twin companies of mounted honour guards behind them carried two brightly flaming torches, and they were both sitting bolt upright in their saddles. The greying and middle-aged, senior officer and his burly subordinate both ignored Cadwy's nodded greeting, remaining aloof and looking more than a shade resentful for some unknown reason. Cadwy made a mental note of this rancour and the minor insult, before turning to his left and to Hefin on his lovely chestnut stallion, and he nodded to him with another smile, putting his surly subordinates aside for the present. Hefting his long and newly whetted spear Hefin made his warface back at Cadwy, and the prince grinned back at him, but the sudden sounds of these onlookers around them drew Cadwy's eyes back up to the northern treeline in the distance, and it was just in time, for he saw something then that had never been seen before, by Cadwy or anyone else here. It had never happened in Albion, and it was a rare sight anywhere, as all who had witnessed it in past times of war had but a few minutes left in this world to wonder at it. A row of monstrous, axe-swinging warriors had stepped proudly from those distant trees, and there was rank after rank of these gigantic and wild looking legends of war emerging from the fringe of that hazy forest. They broke into the clearing now at a low, menacing run between the tall rows of burning torches and they kept coming. A nervous murmuring flitted through the crowded werrin at this terrifying scene, many women's hands finding their mouths without thought just as their men's found their weapons' grips. Rows of these almost identical and merciless looking, gigantic warriors materialised from those deeply shadowed trees to fill the distant clearing, and all here watching trembled as the mighty Gadwyr had come to Albion for the first time ever.

All Albion's warriors had been read the riot act by their leaders, and the tension from being thus restrained in full sight of this blatant onslaught and by this new strike force of the *hên gelyn* was felt by all, but they were under threat of death to remain passive despite this huge and age-old threat from the north. Death however held no fear for most of these seasoned, long blooded warriors, and their eyes glittered darkly at the sight of the 'old enemy' entering Albion again. Tonight, it was in the form of these new and monstrous, fast approaching wardogs of Prydeinig myth and legend and in this; the age-old season for warfare and so their aching fingers caressed the grips of their swords compulsively. These mysterious northerners were nothing short of colossal. Massively muscled to a man, all were uncommonly tall with long, braided red hair and drooping red moustaches, the same coarse and fiery red hair which burst from every part of them in a tangled profusion. They were intricately tattooed all over their marble-white and deeply freckled bodies in oak-gall ink with swirling, blue-knotted patterns and mythological symbols of writhing, battling creatures of this world and the next. Every one of these huge brutes swung an enormous, double-headed battle axe in each pawlike hand, and they set these spinning now as they trotted forwards in their low, sinuous and oh-so-deadly manner. Their lithe, animalistic movements spoke of immense fitness and endless endurance, and their swollen, leather crossed chests were like Iberian wine barrels. Golden lights glinted in their fiery, plaited hair and their beards, lit from the moonlight and the stars above them, and these were their only concession to ceremony. All these Gadwyr used their gold coins to melt down and to coat the knuckle bones from the right hands of their slain enemies, and these they proudly threaded into their wiry red hair. These legendary northern warriors needed no introduction, and the impossibly large and broad leader out front and at the centre of this terrifying host needed none either, as the almost legendary figure of the recently victorious and raised Gŵyr Brith Fawr of these Gadwyr looked simply invulnerable. Somehow even bigger than his gigantic host, and with the most murderous expression twisting his granite features that huge chieftain pioneered his infamous

brotherhood through that blazing avenue of torches and into Albion. His hair and his beard were burdened with gold as were his huge neck, his bulging arms and his fingers, and once all nine hundred of his attendant Gadwyr were in the open, Gŵyr Brith Fawr held up his right-hand axe flat, and the long, bronze amulet of his tribe glinted in the starlight. His awe-inspiring army came to a halt together as one man behind him with a resounding *thud*, and all the werrin and nobility of Albion looked on in stunned awe as these legendary warriors presented themselves. Gŵyr Brith's left-hand axe shot up to join the other, also in the flat position, and his Gadwyr drew an enormous, collective breath. Brith twisted his wrists, ominously turning the blades forward, and he and his warriors prepared to roar their ancient, tribal challenge. As this infamous chieftain lowered his twin axes threateningly toward the Gŵyrd of Albion in ancient and imperative challenge, the Gadwyr bent their knees and their battlecry erupted from their throats shattering the starlit sky above them.

"Gadwyr GrutArd! Gadwyr GrutArd! Gadwyr GrutArd!" They stamped their huge, fur clad feet and roared this out in unison, brandishing their terrible battle axes and making the very ground and the air shake with the oath, and all Albion were awestruck at this thundering sound. Brith then turned to face his men and pointed his axes toward the northern treeline behind them, and this was the signal for them to turn back around and to face the dark, northern highlands. A shard of light winked then from the edge of that distant forest and from some, as yet unseen and mirrored thing. King Ederus and his lords broke the treeline on their mounts, glittering as they moved abruptly into the light, and they were magnificent. Brith and his Gadwyr all raised their axes before bellowing an unexpected and deeply honouring welcome to their liege lord, as his vaunted *bri* had become theirs.

"Ederus Galedon! Ederus Galedon! Ederus Galedon!" They roared as one, pumping their weapons in the air as the celebrated *Gŵyrd y Gogledd*; the 'Lords of the North' rode into Albion in all their dazzling finery. Every soul who was fortunate enough to have witnessed this event would remember

it until their last breath in this world, as even the most cynical old campaigner among them was moved to an awestruck expression of wonder, and many tears were shed by the wide eyed werrin present as they ever longed for peace.

Galedon came south, its mounted warriors following their overlord king into Albion behind their outrageous new strike force, and they kept coming. From the dark shadows of that forest, rank after endless rank of fit and seasoned looking Galedonian warriors did the previously unthinkable. They rode into the border zone of Albion and beyond unchallenged, and yet these were just the vanguard of the cavalry, as thousands of spearmen marched behind the invisible rear ranks of this impressive, mounted force. The Gadwyr peeled apart to make an honour guard avenue, and King Ederus ap Ewin ap Ewin ap Durstus Fawr approached through it. The sonorous and rising voices of his bards arrived then too, soaring across this cold night and washing its deadly warning over the waiting Albion spectators.

“White shields we carry in our hands, and with emblems of the palest gold we come. With glittering blue swords and mighty stout horns we come. Riding so swift and bold, adorned with hooded mail we come. With our tall grey spears of everlasting fame we come. Behind the hard shields of steel and lime we come. Pale faced, curly headed bands of Galedon’s most valiant, ancient line do come. Stand fast all ye Gelyn, for now in arms the unbeaten Galedonau do come!” This was Galedon’s battle-englyn, and to the harmonised, sonorous singing of these ancient words, they did indeed come in arms into Albion.

The flames, the moon and the stars above shone from Ederus’ armour, and his gleaming, golden ringed and stag mounted helmet was dazzling as he steered his beautiful, tar-black stallion down the torch lit avenue and into the lands of his most enduring enemy. The king of Galedon’s wondrous silver shield flashed like a warning from Lord Fwlch himself as he rode sedately for the huge circle of torches at the heart of this fraught

maes, and all Albion trembled at the steady advance of this *old enemy* king into Damnonia and at this infamous lord of war's shimmering arrival.

Cadwy snapped out of his wide-eyed gazing then, as with a rising hot flush he remembered his duties. He nudged Amr, and the beautifully trained and intelligent horse stepped out in style, whilst Cadwy's four royal honour guards rode out behind him to meet King Ederus, his princes and his lords. As Cadwy approached sedately, the Galedon *gŵyrd y cyfarchiad* broke from the vanguard of mounted nobles around Ederus, and these selected 'lords of the salutation' came forward to meet him. They halted twenty reeds away within this enormous circle of blazing torches, dismounted and approached Cadwy and his *gŵyrd* on foot. Cadwy did the same and the men of Albion dismounted behind him, striding forward and closing the gap. This august group approaching were led by the infamous and enormous Epidian King Galan ap Cerwyn, with his white stallion cygil emblazoned across his shield and his armorials. This impressive monarch was supported by the approaching *Gŵyrd y Gogledd* including the pencampwr of all Galedon; *Gŵyr Lloerig ap Irfon* of the House Wenyllon, striding forward in his infamous ram's head helmet. This fabulous creation with its deeply scalloped and ridged, curling horns of silver at the sides of his helm caught every eye, and this famous cygil was mirrored by the Galedon champion's shield and his bulging breastplate. Formerly the Wenyllon pencampwr of King Lleu Llaw Gyffes, Lloerig was a large, broad-shouldered man in the usual mould of the victorious warrior, and he had recently been selected to be Ederus' pencampwr. The pencampwr of all Galedon was a truly envied position among the warrior class, as Arfon Mawr; Ederus' previous champion had defied the staggering odds and had survived his profession. An icon now to all champions, *Gŵyr Arfon Mawr* had been elevated to a landed tumon in fine ceremony and was now enjoying his retirement, governing a huge farming estate in picturesque northern Enouanta. This new champion of Galedon looked at least to be worthy of the appointment to Cadwy, as the set of his cerulean eyes bespoke a lively intelligence, one which mitigated the obvious challenge to some degree of his ferocious countenance. Those same crystal blue

eyes never left those of Bleddyn's to Cadwy's right, and Cadwy was sure he could feel the heat from his own pencampwr's face on the back of his neck. Both parties bowed deeply to each other and Bleddyn took his position at Cadwy's right hand, taking the first step forward for the introduction. He was blushing furiously, but Bleddyn stepped up valiantly to the fabulous Galedon princes, their burly lords and their huge, grisly champions nonetheless, bowing deeply to them all with the utmost respect.

"Your Royal Highness King Galan ap Cerwyn of the honourable House of Epidia and honourable Gŵyrd of Galedon, please allow me to introduce to you His Royal Highness Crown Prince Cadwy ap Cridas of the House Selgofa and the Godebog yr Anrhydedd of Albion!" He said proudly for all to hear and bowed deeply to this huge eastern Galedonian king again. The imposing figure of Gŵyr Lloerig ap Irfon; the grim looking champion of all Galedon stepped forward then, overshadowing his king and all around him and dwarfing Bleddyn, and this steel-clad, ferocious looking colossus bowed to Cadwy.

"Your Royal Highness Crown Prince Cadwy ap Cridas of the House Selgofa and honourable Gŵyrd of Albion, please allow me to introduce his Royal Highness King Galan ap Cerwyn of the honourable House of Epidia and Galedon!" The man growled as if he was being strangled, before bowing deeply to Cadwy and his men again. The niceties at least had been observed and all were free now to greet each other cordially. Nobody moved.

Three other, huge warriors made up Galedon's *gŵyrd y cyfarchiad*. Two were obviously lords of Ederus' personal guard with their contoured chest plates gleaming in the torchlight, their extravagant helms and blood red cloaks marking them out, however, one extremely dangerous looking man stood languidly at the back of this group and remained partly hidden in the flickering shadows. This enormous man displayed no armour, but he wore a dull, brownish mantle and bracs, woven in a strange pattern with indeterminate edges and which seemed magically to fade in and out of

the background. Apart from Lloerig, this muscular soldier was half a foot taller than his comrades and he bore the legendary blue, long toothed cat tattoo of the ghost-warrior at his powerful throat. A silver cat skull brooch pinned his unusual, focus-evading mantle, and he was far and away the most formidable man Cadwy had ever seen in his young life. Cadwy was coldly certain that he was looking at none other than the fabled figure of one Nêr Olwydd Hîr, the infamous ghost-warrior and legendary tracker, the man being one of his and Prydein's greatest heroes. Cadwy felt like pinching himself as just a few reeds away from him stood a hunter assassin of the very highest water, and despite him being one of the old enemy, he was one of Cadwy's lifelong heroes. He was well aware of some of this infamous warrior's exploits as was every young Brython in the land, and try as he might, he could not drag his fascinated gaze away, taking in every minutia of what he could see of the legend and the man. Olwydd Hîr swayed to his left a little then, revealing more of himself, and his pale eyes suddenly locked onto Cadwy's, and he felt the warmth rise up his throat at the overt challenge in that merciless gaze. The pitiless face above that unnerving, screaming blue cat was chiselled from granite and framed by dark hair that was plaited heavy with iron warrior rings, and his fingers were thick with the same. He wore no beard, just a finely shaped pair of drooping black moustaches, one of which was being caressed by a forefinger as he coolly appraised Cadwy. The pale amber, brutal eyes seemed to strip away his mental defences in layers as if he was peeling an onion, and the man's *bri* was like a colossal mountain around him. His eyes never left those of Cadwy's, and he felt locked in their dread, serpent like gaze. That ghost-warrior's indomitable character and his legendary abilities oozed from every relaxed, liquid limb of his powerful body, and this menacing killer of men grimaced then at Cadwy, showing his teeth and giving him a wink. Cadwy felt no welcome in either gesture, only a savage rush of sudden and mortal fear. Finally, he found the strength to tear his wide eyes away and he steeled himself to bow deeply to King Galan and Ederus' captains, noticing glumly that Ederus played no part in this ceremonial meeting, even though he had striven to get his attention

so that he may display his deepest respects. Galedon's imperious high king had not looked to him once, remaining cold and aloof throughout this procedure with Albion's *boys*. This did not bode well for his secret agenda, and although Cadwy's spirits tumbled he lifted his head, and with a proud but aching heart he proceeded with these important ceremonial duties. There was no idle talk between these two groups this day, as *old enemies* was a phrase commonly used privately by both still, and perhaps *boys at play* was another whispered in amusement by these grizzled Galedonian northerners. Old habits die hard and so they stood for long moments, nonchalantly evaluating each other. The druids exchanged votive gifts to one side of this group, mostly white crystal pebbles, bones and other such things they hold valuable, and Cadwy bravely broke this stalemate of the 'gŵyrd' then, as was his duty in representing the host nation, and so he strode forward to exchange token banners, ending this awkward impasse. He handed the T-mounted banner of Albion with its highly stylised, hump-backed boar cygil to an iron faced guardsman and collected in return a similar token banner of Galedon with its blood red background and its infamous rearing golden stag. Cadwy held it aloft with honour and due reverence, just as he had been instructed and had practised repeatedly at DunAlclwyd. He turned then and walked stiffly back to Ioddo and the horses, with Hefin and Bleddyn at his sides, and the lords of Albion remounted. Cadwy used just his knees, and Amr responded dutifully, wheeling around before heading back to his new home through these long lines of roaring torches and at his elegant, easy pace.

Crown Prince Cadwy ap Cridas, newly made *Tumon of Bidog, Brif-Siryff y Gorllewin* of Selgofa and the Honourable *Godebog yr Anrhydedd of Albion* led the massed warriors of the old enemy south into his country, in peace this significant time, and every soul in Albion seemed to exhale at that moment. Old men put away their spears and many hands fell away from sweaty sword grips. A small glimmer of hope flared bright in these onlookers suddenly, as all came to realise at last that the mighty and powerful federation of Galedon, come in all its dazzling and terrifying glory was finally an ally. The multitude of warrior spirits assembling in this

majestic part of gogledd Prydein soared with a shared feeling of immense power now, as these infamous northern Brythons were united at last and on the march to war. Thousands of marching spearmen began clearing the treeline to the north, and these stretched way back into that dark forest to where a herd of several hundred reserve horses followed. Many of those magnificent animals were the big work horses used for moving stuff mostly, and an equal number of them were the spare warhorses which may or may not be needed for the fighting ahead, but a small number among them were the better, hardier breeds used by the aristocracy and the long-sighted scouts and outriders of this vast army. A much smaller number of ultrafine thoroughbreds were kept at the rear, and these were the out-and-out arrows of the horse world. These fine-featured and super rare, equine comets were reserved exclusively for Epidia's lucrative middle eastern exports and but one other, domestic customer; the mounted and independent messengers of Prydein known as the honourable *Cennadwr Marchog*. Although identical in service and aspect in all five kingdoms of this great country, this ancient brotherhood was sworn to none and ruled by none, being a completely independent organisation and sworn to serve all the kingdoms of Prydein equally and faithfully. A dozen of these small but proud, green attired messengers rode at the back of this controlled herd of trotting treasures this memorable night, as they would never let any one of their beloved horses out of their sight for a second. Aloof to any regular soldiery, these elite Galedonian riders would meet and sojourn to DunAlclwyd together with Albion's identical Cennadwr Marchog, but for now were content to eat the army's dust, as their lightning-fast mounts were each worth a lord's ransom and their own lives. Dozens of ox-drawn carts trundled along in the dust of these unique horses and their flamboyant riders, kicking it up again with their own and bringing up the rear, carrying with them the chattels and disassembled chariots of the aristocratic gŵyrd, who were miles ahead at this point. They rattled and rumbled south along these broad lanes with the rest of this great army's mountain of baggage, all heading for the coast and for the *Rock of the Brythons*, and followed as

always by many women, some with children and some alone. These were hopeful soldier wives in the main, and about the usual number of soldier whores who followed the army everywhere. The wisest among the remaining spectators who watched these unfortunate women drag themselves along in the dust in pursuit of a hot meal and a tent to sleep in for the night, realised that life was the same for all Brythons and that Albion was going to have to take the good along with the bad.

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Brif-Lon Brast ap Bwlch and his equally regal looking subordinate colleague and combrogi; Rhingyll-Lon Meyrug ap Prys had broken their fast well and at the best tavern and hostelry in Tref Alclwyd this morning. They were both feeling physically improved if not in mood and temperament, but the weather was fine, and it promised to be an entertaining day. They were clothed in the expensive dress uniforms of two splendid officers in Albion's Order of the Honour Keepers, the force which had performed so impeccably as honour guard to Galedon last night, and they had been celebrating since, lapping up the reflected honour and the bri. Major Brast had seen active service in three past borderland disputes, and his record was a good one. He was regarded as although a little pompous a good and a competent officer. Sergeant-Major Meyrug had been involved in the defence of two sieges in his time in service, but had survived both episodes with little personal risk, and was yet in truth unproven in battle. All this intelligence and much more had been gathered on these two fine looking gentlemen in the intervening hours and by some very senior figures in Albion's court, especially one local man, who was regarded as a Grandee of the Damnoniau and all Albion. That aged *Cadfridog* Teyrnnon ap Gwawl of the Damnoniau had been the *Benadwr* of the Order of the Honour Keepers long before Cadwy and when these two senior men had been young *faner*. Although there was fifteen years between their induction, that legendary general had commanded them both as lowly 'ensigns' and could speak from knowledge as to their character. From his large hillside retirement thatch

overlooking a lovely and blooming meadow above Tref Alclwyd, the general had spoken well of both men to a bold and handsome young Albion prince, one who had come to enquire politely and respectfully. The old Cadfridog had been glad of the company, and soon had his slave and servant rushing around his large thatch to offer some hospitality. Despite his advanced years, General Teyrnnon was blessed with a good memory, especially regarding the men who had served under him. In his expert opinion, apart from the senior officer being a little aloof and elitist, even as his modest lineage gave him no such encouragement, they were decent enough soldiers. Also in the general's professional opinion, Brast was a man who needed the military far more than the military needed him, and he had been clever enough to grasp this early on, becoming a true career officer. He was known as a stickler for detail and devout to the obligations of his duty, and whilst this unbending personality secured his employment, confirmed his authority and ensured his orders were carried out to the letter, it did not make him the most popular officer in the order. The younger Meyrug, whilst being equally loyal and diligent to the Major was not perhaps the sharpest spear in the rack, but he had no demerits, and to all reports had discharged his duties competently enough to gain his rank legitimately. All this had been thoroughly digested by young Prince Ioddo, and he had just managed to escape the general's thatch after also digesting four large horns of strong mead and a plateful of butter biscuits. He had managed to consume all this whilst being regaled with lurid exploits of the general's time in the 'Third Western War', back when men were real men, and a descending line of champions who wore little armour always faced off in mortal combat before the brawl. Ioddo had ridden back to DunAlclwyd with his vision swimming, a broad, loose smile on his lips and one hand on his gurgling stomach.

Had these two beautifully turned-out officers of Albion's honour guard known the depth and possible repercussions of this covert investigation into their integrity, they would have thrown up their excellent break of fast in the nearest ditch with fear. They blithely strolled down *stryd fawr* of Tref Alclwyd now oblivious, determined to enjoy their morning in this

week-long festival of Lughnas, even though they had been directed to attend the large smithy forge at the north-western limit of the caer ahead of them on its promontory. They were to meet a senior officer of their order for some apparent 'social' engagement there, and although it would not have been their first choice of entertainment this day, they both looked forward the event as it would surely be a communal occasion with plenty of food and drink. Brast and Meyrug chatted amiably as they walked downhill toward the glittering invitation of afon Clwyd in this bright morning sunshine, and the great peninsula fortress ahead of them seemed to float serenely on her sacred surface. The streets ahead of them were thronged with people, as these two great nations were preparing to move south in expedition over the next few days, together. Bunting and flags were strung everywhere, and the carnival atmosphere permeating Tref Alclwyd was entirely infectious, lifting both men's moods. They discussed their orders as they passed through the raucous, vibrant and aromatic rows of street vendors and merchants, orders which had come down from on-high. Both had been reluctantly forced to give up their much in demand free time and to postpone their planned self-promoting tour of the district's finer alehouses. Despite their lack of choice in the matter, they remained somewhat ebullient still as any social event in this celebrating caer would surely be full of people, all interested in the vital part they had played in yesterday's ritual ceremony, and somebody else would also be footing the bill for whatever they were about to consume.

They had donned their dress uniforms, as unsure of the protocols they played safe, especially as they had been ordered there by a marshall of their order. With Major Brast leading the way and marching ramrod straight as was his custom, he pushed his way through the troops and the werrin alike which were choking these streets. Meyrug scuttled behind him, heading toward the imposing and guarded main gates of the fortress. Striding up the broad ramp, they entered DunAlclwyd through a tall pedestrian door set into one of the huge and black main gates. With just a nod to the gatekeeper, they made their way into this familiar fortress and took the direct lane running down the centre of this fortified peninsula and

to the monumental keep at its heart. The mount was bedecked in its vibrant bear pennants today and which billowed wildly above the huge, split crag emerging from the caer's heart, and they competed gamely with the streams of fluttering bunting strung everywhere. Brast enjoyed seeing soldiers and the dross alike bow and scrape when he passed, and in his dress uniform with the fabulous ceremonial helmet in the crook of his left arm he was almost strutting as he negotiated the busy lanes, footbridges and stone steps of this fortress. Meyrug bathed in the tail of that same martial glory, two steps behind.

The ringing and the clashing of practice arms was loud as they cleared the wide expanse of parade ground with its groups of furious fighters, and they took the steps down to the circular service road paying them little attention. The ground began to slope downwards toward the shoreline here, where the trader's road wound its way around the bulbous end of this isthmus and along the lowest perimeter of the grounds. The view across these hallowed waters from here and to the rising green lands beyond was breathtaking, and they both paused here to appreciate Arglwydd Clwyd's beautiful sinuous curves and the rich, rugged land of Lug behind her. The ground here was well trodden, proving it was a popular viewpoint and Meyrug took in great lungful's of cold, sea air to clear his head. He always enjoyed the sights and sounds of the waves crashing softly to the shore at this broad estuary and the cries of the herring gulls as they wheeled overhead, following a line of returning fishing boats up the Linn and to the distant wharf gates. Brast too took in this riverine panorama, standing with his legs apart, hands clasped behind his back and breathing deeply for long minutes before he turned to his subordinate with a tilt of his head.

"Well Rhingyll-Lon, Bel's approaching his second quadrant, shall we see what delights await us?" Without waiting for an answer, Major Brast turned on his heel and strode off with great purpose, and his Sergeant-Major had to hurry to keep up. Surprisingly, there were far fewer people abroad at the northern shoreline of this peninsula, so they soon

approached the curve of the great outer wall and inner ditch with ease and to where the large stone forge, the farriery and the smithy were located, and their appointed meeting place. Brast and Meyrug both came to a wordless halt, as the rill cutting through the walls from the inner ditch had obviously become clogged, apparently a regular occurrence this time of year. With no outlet, the stinking ditch had backed up, and a big curve of ground inside the northern wall was now under several inches of foul water, and it barred their way. This creeping crescent of filthy, loathsome sludge had encroached one whole corner of this walled perimeter and had flooded three of the round thatches of the werrin inside it and alongside these great stone workshops. With its double doors thrown wide open, they could see that even the straw strewn floor of the great smithy was wet from this flooding, and the appalling smell was all pervading. These two dashing officers looked at each other with puzzled expressions as the smithy had already been an unfathomable location for a soiree, but in this condition it was plainly ludicrous. There was clearly no gathering here at all, as there were no people anywhere, not even in and around the normally busy forge. This was obviously from the choking stench that hung in the air, and which seemed to coat the back of their throats horribly. The only movement anywhere was from the bobbing heads of a group of lowly *cloddiwr* showing above the ditch they worked in, attempting no doubt to clear the foul obstruction.

"We have been given faulty directions or instructions here Meyrug I'll wager!" Brast glowered at his sergeant and with the annoyance of all this preparation, for nothing but a wasted walk and a bogus location. He spat the miasma from his mouth with a grimace of distaste and frustration.

"Bloody typical of the *gold-brooches* that is! And on my free day for Lug's arse!" He cursed loudly, using his catchall phrase for the high marshalls of their order, and Meyrug looked just as annoyed beside him. "I tell you lad, if I find someone's been yanking our chains over this, I will use their guts to hang them with!" Brast growled, and he spat the taste of this airborne filth from his mouth again.

"We could always visit *The Armoury* sir, or we could go back to *The Alclwyd* for more of their wonderful curmi-da?" His rhingyll-lon proposed with an unconvincing resignation showing on his broad face. His tall and elegant major tilted his head, pretending to consider this suggestion seriously, and was about to answer Meyrug in the affirmative when a loud voice cut him off.

"There you are!"

They both turned slowly to see one of the filthy, ditch digging labourers approaching them, splashing through this unspeakable filth underfoot with little care and waving his mud-covered arm at them.

"The bloody impertinence!" Meyrug breathed, his fists clenching. That a base, worthless creature like this one should even think of approaching them in such a disrespectful manner and in that disgusting state made him want to break the man's nose. He revised his opinion somewhat as this broad-shouldered navvy looked a capable brute, approaching them casually with a cheeky bloody grin, ankle deep in this stinking muck and wiping his filthy hands on a kloo tie. Meyrug was furious, and he was about to challenge this lowly reprobate regardless of his size but was saved by his superior.

"Leave this wretch to me Meyrug. I feel like tearing someone a new arse right about now!" The major growled, bringing himself upright and knowing his stunning uniform and the plumed helmet in the crook of his arm would offer no doubt as to his authority, and he prepared to exercise that same martial authority now to its maximum effect.

Brast looked this approaching ruffian up and down in unconcealed distaste, knowing that this broad-shouldered, filthy and uneducated migrant *llafurwr* was from some backwoods village huddled in some unknown Albion scrubland. This foolish ditchdigger thought he could tally-hoo to anyone he liked, and whichever of the tribe's slums he had crawled from, he was about to be put precisely in his place. For good measure,

Brast would put this brazen young lout clearly in the picture of just who held the power in this part of the world, but once again he was forestalled.

“Brif-Lon Brast ap Bwlch, and Rhingyll-Lon Meyrug ap Prys, we have been awaiting your arrival for some time my esteemed colleagues.” This stinking navvy told them both boldly, smiling wickedly through the grime on his filthy face.

Brast nearly soiled his bracs when the realisation of just who this dung and mud-splattered person was in front of him, and his heart skipped a few beats.

“Who the cnuch do you think...”

Brast’s grip on Meyrug’s rising arm was brutal, and it stilled his words in an instant, but Meyrug’s mouth was agape with angry question still and at the bald-faced bloody nerve of this dirty labourer. The fact that this mud-covered man knew both their full rank and titles had not percolated its way through his thoughts yet, but he was saved once more by his superior, who to Meyrug’s utter amazement released his arm, stood to strict attention and bowed deeply and respectfully to the filthy rogue.

“Your royal highness, please excuse me I didn’t recognise you!” Brast blurted out, pointing at Cadwy’s mud-covered clothing, but the enigmatic smile remained on the young prince’s face, as he was clearly enjoying their stunned expressions. He seemed especially impressed with Meyrug, who looked as though he had just swallowed a goose egg as the identity of their august newcomer fell like a deluge of icy water over him.

“Oh, don’t worry about this, it washes out!” Prince Cadwy grinned at them through the streaks. “I’m so pleased you could both make it!” He smiled again at them both in that unfathomable but decidedly predatory way of his. “Please follow me gentlemen.” He added with a gleam in his eye, and he turned to lead them into the gloomy interior of the stinking smithy. The two officers followed their prince on stiff legs, as both were now utterly confused and did what all soldiers do when faced with the unknown, they adopted the well-known ‘blindly follow all orders’, blinkered state of the

nervous recruit. Cadwy waved them in and leaned against the cold blockwork of the forge as he assessed them both thoughtfully. "I felt that we got off on the wrong foot yesterday gentlemen, largely as you refused to join in the spirit of my gŵyrd and determined to leave yourselves out." He informed them expressionless. He held his hand up, as the major was about to speak up in their defence as was expected of him perhaps, and Brast fell silent as he and his comrade came to stand on the wet and stinking floor of this smithy before their clearly angry prince, completely out of their depths at this unusual situation. "I could have taken this as a personal insult, on my first day of the appointment and on such an historic and important occasion, and in a royal nomination from my tad no less! I attempted to include you in our spirit, but you made proud to ignore me." The prince told them this but with an edge to his voice now. Both men paled visibly at these words, but they remained quiet and wide eyed, neither having any idea in which direction this summons would lead, and it heightened their nervousness. "I perceive however, that it had as much to do with my choice of cyfail for the honour guard as it did my new appointment. You may have been put out that a mere teenager was placed in charge of your order, I shall never know, but when two of your long serving colleagues were replaced by my equally young friends for the historic ceremony of a lifetime, it did not sit well with you two apparently. What you did not know gentlemen, is that it was assumed by all at my appointment that all four of my cyfail would be my honour guard, but I risked the love and fealty of two of my closest combrogi to replace them with you two cold fish!" He told them this seriously, pleased at seeing the realisation show on their faces. "I insisted that you two keep your positions for the procedure, as in my opinion and on the face of it, your services merited them and all the benefits and bonuses that came with those positions for that unique ceremony." The two soldiers looked down at their feet at this revelation, no longer able to meet their prince's accusing gaze. "It seems I was too generous, but I haven't mentioned this insult to my tad of course, well clearly!" He smiled at them again now and the sharklike edge was there again. "As you would both be in the

Underworld now chatting to Lord Lug instead of me, and I would still be up to my cal in cold and stinking mud.” He was still smiling, but these words had their effect, and both men began to shuffle their feet on the damp and filthy straw in acute discomfort. Prince Cadwy took a few steps around the forge now, casually inspecting the long iron tongs and the other tools hanging on these rough walls, before turning back to them with that humorous but entirely worrying smile. “So, you will be pleased to hear that you both passed the first part of my inspection, in that the reports from both Cadfridog Teyrnnon and Gŵyr Turen ap Gamon were favourable, and other experienced sources provided adequate detail as to your unremarkable personal lives and your very ordinary habits.”

Although the prince’s words were a confirmation of some kind of initial success, all these soldiers heard were the venerable names of two of the most senior and respected gŵyr in the land, and both Pencampwr Turen ‘the deft’ and Cadfridog Teyrnnon were absolute legends. That famous general had been their commanding officer when they had joined, and the mention of his name now made them both quake in their boots, that such investigation had been made into them. All this for an almost unseen slight, but they also knew that an insult to any warrior was a slur on his bri, and however small or disguised, no such slight could go unattended. They were aware too that some insults could only be washed away with blood. They both silently prayed to their Gods as this smiling, unsettling noble slouching against the forge seemed to be deciding their fate. The major took a chance then and gambled on a sincere plea.

“Honourable Prince Cadwy and Godebog of our sacred order, please let me humbly apologise for the unutterable folly of our insolence yesterday. I am deeply mortified that I would allow such a petty emotion to cloud my judgement.” He admitted morosely, drawing Cadwy’s eye just as the truth in the words drew his ears. “As for Meyrug, he’s a good man lord, a little slow to catch on but I will vouch for his honour and stand his surety.” Brast offered magnanimously standing upright, and Cadwy smiled, finally seeing something which interested him.

“Well-spoken Brast ap Bwlch, and credit to you for the surety of your man. Carry on like this and you’ll just sail through the second part of my examination!”

Their eyes opened at the repeated news of a ‘second part’, and their nerves returned as this young prince was an impossible man to read, but it did not sound like a pleasant afternoon in the alehouse whatever the upshot.

“Today’s exercise gentlemen will be about achieving two important goals. The obvious first task today is to honour and to discharge our sacred, Gods-sworn duty to serve and to protect our subjects. In this regard, three of our poorest and most infirm citizens have fallen prey to these abominable conditions. These vulnerable elders, who we honour for their life-long contribution to our society will surely succumb if we ignore them in this, their time of need.” Prince Cadwy told them seriously and saw that he had both men’s undivided attention. “We will do this *el y werrin*, this ‘people’s work’ wherever it is needed, four times a year and a week before each sacred festival, to remind us of our equally sacred obligation to humility. You will join us on these good works, as will more of the fine combrogi of our order when I have things properly organised.” He said this more to himself before looking up and smiling at them both again. “We pay for work to be done all through the year of course, but this work we will do with our own hands although benefits our werrin, is not done for them in truth but for ourselves!” Cadwy passionately shared this insight with these subordinate officers of his, as he was determined to get them on his side before this day was done. Cadwy left the forge and moved to stand directly before them, looking them both straight in the eye. “It is done for our own benefit gentlemen and that of our souls and our honour. Strangely, regardless of some of the abhorrent chores we accomplish for our subjects, once the task is complete and you see the tears of wonder and gratitude on their world worn faces, it makes you feel remarkable. Once completed, you are at once imbued with the warm glow of worthy accomplishment and of dutiful service!” Cadwy informed them brightly,

hoping to share some of his feelings with these men. He paused then, pacing the wet straw of this great smithy as if gathering his thoughts. “However, there is to my inclination an equally important, secondary aspect to my workings here today. That is to eliminate the gulf between your new *godebog*; me, my *cyfail* and yourselves, who today represent the rest of our august order. Anything you learn here today and deem pertinent, I will leave you to pass on to the other members and enlisted men, as this *el y werrin* as we call it will be high on the agenda of our order. You will also be pleased to hear that my highly regarded, influential and powerful royal *cyfail* are eager for you to join us. After all gentlemen, you are both a little young to retire!” Cadwy laughed.

These two men chuckled too in response to this and not just to be polite, as a new understanding was now reflected on their faces despite this plainly undisguised threat. Whether Cadwy knew it or not, his impassioned words were beginning to inspire both these soldiers. This impressive young nobleman was showing them his vision for the future of their ancient order, and how really useful they could be to the ordinary people of Albion; the *werrin*. Their young prince took his time then and explained to them passionately and in a way they both understood clearly that it was the *werrin* who were the very *engine* of Albion; the farmers, smiths and farriers, the cooks, the tanners and all the poor, hard-working people of Albion and Prydein. It was these hardy people who carry out the myriad tasks required for all to live and to prosper in this hard world. It was in reality the *werrin* who paid for them to strut around in fine clothes, eat the best food and to ride beautiful, expensive horses, and to essentially perform what was mostly outdated tradition. He also held up a stark mirror to their own base and selfish lives with his words and his plans for them, opening their eyes to the quality of their new *godebog* and how much their lives could change for the better under his leadership. The huge character of this young prince became clear to them as he talked passionately to both of them as men. It made them suddenly want to please this magnificent prince in any way they could, but Brast at least knew already that words here were entirely superfluous. What was

obviously required here today from them both was action, and soldiers were ever used to action and much hard work.

“You can throw your fine capes and armour in here gentlemen.” Cadwy threw his arm wide in invitation to the smelly, straw filled workshop. He then picked up the two wooden shovels he had left leaning against the forge earlier, throwing one to each man. “You’ll be needing these and there’s a barrow over there in the corner. So, as soon as you’re ready gentlemen, our merry band awaits you!” He informed them with a nod and another oblique smile, before striding out of the large open doors of the smithy, purposely leaving them to their own thoughts and devices.

These two soldiers exchanged looks of amazement again, both stunned to silence and with hanging mouths at just how quickly their morning had changed. Without a word they stripped their outer garments off down to their woolly vests, their immaculate dress bracs and the gleaming boots two young Macwy had laboured to polish that morning. Brast hefted the spades as Meyrug gripped the two handles of the stout timber barrow and they left the smithy, splashing through the filth and heading for the group of labouring men in the ditch ahead, both still a little nervous but now walking with a livelier step. A completely mud-covered Prince Cadwy threw up his arm in jovial greeting from the stinking ditch.

“Jump in gentlemen! The mud is good for one’s skin I’m told!” He grinned and was delighted when he saw both men finally smile in return, the irony of their situation not lost on either, and they both began to laugh. They dropped into the freezing, dung-stinking mud in their shiny boots and pressed trousers, and Cadwy laughed with them. These two officers then began to shovel shit with the best of them.

Two hours flew along with a ton of stinking mud, and these two officers soon found themselves laughing and chuckling along with this filthy royal retinue. Their banter was constant and ruthless and just as filthy as their clothes. No airs and no graces were displayed by any as they worked closely together as a clear, lifelong group of friends. Both new arrivals envied the tight bond between these awesome, indefatigable nobles of

Albion, and they had both come to realise the same thing without words. They saw the same look on each other's surprised faces, like a pencampwr finding his warlord, a druid finding his Gods, or an uati acolyte finding a truth in the infinite ether, these two soldiers had found their real leader; a true *tywysog*. Their new godebog was not the stuffy, semi-retired noble they had expected, nor was he the overprivileged youth they had thought him yesterday, far from it, this young aristocrat was a warrior-prince in every sense. They were just beginning to appreciate that he was the one they would follow to the ends of this earth if that's what he required of them, and their renewed efforts reflected this unspoken realisation.

A mule drawn cart drew up outside the smithy, arriving late with the afternoon and driven by two arwein from the dun. As they clattered to a halt, Cadwy called a halt to the proceedings.

"Time to clean up a bit, eat a little food and rest for a while!" He declared to much exhausted sounds of pleasure and concord.

"Rome wasn't built in a day!" Bleddyn stated bluntly and with a broad grin. Many were shocked at the humorous use of this deeply cursed name, but Cadwy laughed at his irreverence.

The cart was loaded with all that was required, and as the men washed the muck from their hands and faces in leather buckets, the arwein began to unpack the food and the big pots of curmi-da. Brast and Meyrug although now burned with a desire to belong to this inspirational group of nobles in whatever capacity, their nerve abandoned them when it came to sit and to repast with them, as the centuries of inherent protocols and infinite rules which bound every Brythonic society could not be overlooked so easily and so simply put away with the shovels. Cadwy however had other ideas. He brooked no buts and bade them join him and so they did. Soon, they were all cramming food and pouring ale down their throats as if they had not had sustenance in weeks, and the silence was deafening. Within minutes of the last morsel eaten however, they were laughing again at the hilariously competitive and scathingly insulting repartee that

flowed once more between these young royals. It soon became apparent that the Enouantan Prince Selwyn was the quiet one, considered the thinker of the group, and although he was known to be a serious young man and a shrewd tactician, he would occasionally laugh along with everyone else but would never cause the laughter. In hilarious contrast, the constant but comical bickering between Hefin, Ioddo and Bleddyn had them all crying now again with laughter.

“When you’re king Cadwy, all Albion will be like this!” Bleddyn blurted out with a laugh, draining another log of ale like a sinkhole and belching loudly into the stunned silence. Looking around at the appalled faces, he missed the obvious tragedy that would need to take place before this momentous event could happen and completely ignored the ill omen of the spoken words. Hefin punched him hard on the arm for his crass outburst.

“Ow! What?” Bleddyn protested, rubbing his arm with that confused look on his mud-streaked and hairy face. He looked around at his friends again, but all were silent. “What?” He asked them again, taking a huge bite out of yet another meat pie and shrugging his huge shoulders.

“I’ve had a recent enquiry about you Bleddyn.” Cadwy broke the awkward silence easily, drawing his pencampwr’s attention.

“Me?” He mumbled around his mouthful, crumbs of pastry falling from his beard, still looking a mite confused.

“Yes, Bleddyn ap Arawn. I had a senior representative from an ancient and august body of men contact me. They wanted you to lead them as your reputation has spread so widely.” Cadwy told him this mysteriously and deadpan, drawing a more suspicious look now from his champion as Bleddyn was far from stupid. “But I told them you were not only my beloved combrogi, an honoured member of my royal cyfail, but that you are my chosen pencampwr and that you were not free of that lifetime oath to me, nor would I release you from it!” Cadwy added proudly with a

nod and a wink, and Bleddyn straightened, a gratified look on his broad face now, and he swallowed noisily.

“Who wanted me for their pencampwr my prince?” Bleddyn asked him proudly, and the mud-streaked faces of all these men turned to Cadwy for answer.

“Pencampwr? Did I say pencampwr?” Cadwy shrugged his mouth, looking around at his loyal combrogi and shaking his head, stretching out the moment, and Bleddyn frowned. “Actually, it was the *Llysgennau*, and they are looking for a senior diplomat to replace Androgeus when he.....” The rest of his words were drowned out from the uproar of laughter, and Cadwy grinned as the realisation of his meaning showed on his champion’s tactless and bearded face. The laughter rose to gale force around them, and Bleddyn paled.

“Me a poxy dip? You cal-munching, bastard son of a stockman!” Bleddyn cursed Cadwy roundly and with a low growl as he stood, dropping the half-eaten pie to the mud. He bent to grab a handful of the same mud when Meyrug ap Prys stood suddenly at the other side of this trench, his face white with fury, and all looked at the big, mud-splattered soldier in surprise.

“You will take back those heinous words, and you *will* apologise for them sir!” He snapped, his broad shoulders thrown back, and he was clearly rigid with rage at such an insult to his prince and high marshall. Bleddyn looked at him in shocked surprise and with his eyes opening, before he suddenly doubled up and laughed like a drain, as did the other nobles in this trench. Major Brast was standing stiff and pale himself now however, alongside and in support of his subordinate, also clearly enraged at this treasonous defamation of his prince.

“It looks like you have two new wardogs Cadwy!” Bleddyn laughed again, pointing at the two ramrod-straight and clearly livid officers, slapping his wet thigh at the unconcealed outrage on both their faces. Quickly changing his target, Bleddyn launched the wet and stinking handful of

mud straight at Meyrug, hitting him square in the face, a goodly portion of which besmirched the major's stiff moustaches alongside him. The world stood absolutely still for a fraction of a moment, and then everyone fell about laughing again. It was uncontrollable and entirely infectious, touching the major too surprisingly, who relaxed now seeing the funny side as he wiped his mouth on a sleeve. Alongside him, Meyrug scraped the mud from both eyes with his fingers, and then seeing that all were laughing uncontrollably at him, he did the one thing he always did when all else failed. He took a deep breath, put his head down and he charged the pencampwr of his prince. All were surprised but delighted too and were instantly animated as these two big men went down in a huge splash of mud. The uproar immediately ramped up as these onlookers surrounded them, chorusing the age-old children's playground chant; "Cwffi! Cwffi! Cwffi!" and the elated Tumon and Sherriff, Crown Prince Cadwy of Selgofa and Albion led the chanting.

The two men brawled and wrestled in the remaining sludge of this ditch and as their friends hooted and laughed their encouragement from where they sat on the bank, flinging wet handfuls of mud at them as they struggled like two drunken sailors. The conditions made it almost impossible to fight proper, but it was soon evident that neither man was trying to kill the other, they were just testing each other's strength. They came to a laughing, bellowing standstill after a few more breathless embraces, blowing and steaming like two prize bulls, and their audience stood to applaud them. The major beamed with pride and clapped like a fool with everyone else at the good spirits displayed, and all were slapping the two big men on their broad and filthy backs. Cadwy's newcomers were covered in stinking mud, but both were grinning like fools along with his own fools. All but Hefin missed the long and altogether thoughtful and appreciative look his prince levelled at both these soldiers then. Cadwy came to realise with a distinct pleasure that Brast ap Bwlch and Meyrug ap Prys had become *his* men in every sense of the word.

Two hours later a huge cheer went up from them all as the blockage broke and the stinking water gushed out into the rill, pouring through the sluice in the perimeter wall and on down the gully toward the cold waters of the Clwyd. The ditch slowly drained completely, and this small lake of inconvenience began to dissipate. The Albion cyfail shook each other's filthy hands and clapped each other on the back, as finally their 'el y werrin' for this day at least was done.

Much later that night, long after most of those weary aristocrats had bathed and had collapsed into an exhausted sleep, Bleddyn and Meyrug stood in the smoky back room of The Alclwyd alehouse, holding each other up as best they could as they swayed to their own smudged but harmonised singing. The curmi from the logs in their free hands spilled on the straw at their feet as they swayed from side to side, singing at the tops of their voices. The locals had long given up trying to pacify or accompany these two massive but filthy and stinking gentlemen, as they insisted on singing the same song over and over again.

"When I was a soldier boy, and my legs were thin as sticks!" They roared the opening line again, and the locals in this alehouse knew well enough to leave them both alone. As in the smoky, beery atmosphere of this popular tavern these two huge, malodorous warriors became firm and lifelong friends, arms thrown about each other and both singing their big hearts out on its filthy straw.

* * * * *

Bleddyn was conspicuously absent the following morning when the Albion cyfail assembled to share their break of fast. Those present were dressed in their ceremonial clothing for this long day ahead, but there was a sleepy air about this long table this morning. Their commander Cadwy joined them in his superb godebog's ceremonial uniform under the luxurious sable cloak and with the stunning, brightly plumed helmet in the crook of his arm, and that fabulously feathered crest was a lovely Albion blue of course. Taking his seat just as groups of young arwein began to bring large trays of hot food into Berwyn's refectory hall, he realised that

he was ravenous when the first whiff of those delicious boar sausages caught his twitching nose. These young aristocrats were among the first in the pecking order, and they helped themselves to the piping hot food at the head of the queue. They heaped rashers of wonderful, locally smoked bacon onto their plates and lovely big duck's eggs, fried in olive oil. There were dished trays of roasted boar sausages which were hugely popular across these northern territories. Lamb's liver and kidneys sauteed with fennel and wild garlic, and fat, curling blood-sausages shared silver dishes with piles of steaming oatcakes fried in butter on these long tables. These were just some of the delicacies laid out on these trays of mouth-watering food, arrayed on a long line of adjoined, linen covered tables. These had been set out before the row of tall rectangular window openings in the main, eastern facing wall of this large and intimately familiar eating hall, and baskets of freshly baked bread squares filled the end table. The outer shutters had been thrown open and secured at dawn by the stewards of this great caer, and although the inner shutters were still latched against their soft leather gaskets, their louvres had been tilted open allowing daylight to illuminate this *breakfast* feast for these royals and their noble friends. This close but subdued Albion group picked their choice from the extravagant buffet on offer as the other nobles behind them formed a queue.

"Selwyn, would you do me a small service?" Cadwy asked him quietly from the head of this long queue.

"I will my prince." Selwyn answered him with equal care.

"Oh it's nothing serious Sel, just go and drag my proud pencampwr from his bracken and tell him regardless of his hangover, he has an obligation and a duty to me today!"

"I will go now Cadwy!" Selwyn made to move but Cadwy restrained him.

"Break your fast first my combrogi and let the fool have another half hour!" He winked at Selwyn, who nodded in return but with little humour this morning. Joining his friends, Cadwy bade his two officers a good

morning and who both stood and bowed to him, returning the greeting formally and properly. He was impressed with Meyrug as although he looked pale and drawn, he was washed, dressed and present in body if not totally in mind.

Berwyn's refectory and the whole caer dominating this peninsula was busy with preparations for the allied journey to Cridas' DunEil, with Cadwy's honour guard leading them the fifty-six miles south, beginning down *stryd fawr* of Tref Alclwyd. The sun had just risen, and an early start was a must if they were to complete these miles in the allotted time, which meant at least ten to fifteen hours in the saddle each day dependant on terrain and weather conditions. There could be no ritual or fancy footwork on this long journey, as all needed to press on to reach his father's triple-hilled fortress in good time.

Cadwy had used his hot seal for the first time on rising and had passed an edict that the Gŵyrd of Albion's honour guard from this day on would number six. From now on, and apart from him, they would comprise *four* noblemen alongside the two appointed officers. Now *all* his loyal cyfail could share the vanguard of his honour guard for the huge reception and welcome party waiting for them at his father's Selgofan capital. Bleddyn appeared then to much scorn and ribald abuse from around this table. He was pale around the gills and subdued for once, but he joined them on this long, benched table, studiously ignoring the derision with a grimace, but he gave a slight nod to Meyrug and the briefest of bows to Cadwy. The big man sat with a grunt, ignoring both the insults and the food, ruefully sipping his morning ale, chewing a little dried burdock for his headache and sweating out his hangover. Cadwy had presented Ioddo and Selwyn with their uniforms earlier, and he was surprised at how emotional Ioddo had become but less so perhaps by Selwyn's cool acceptance. He was glad they were now a whole cyfail again at least and especially for today's long journey ahead, which by the look of the lowering sky promised a great deal of rain despite the season. The weather was predicted to worsen as they travelled south along the spine of this great country, but

at least it would give him ample opportunity to deliberate the huge hurdles which lay ahead of them all in this quickly developing and maturing summer.

Cadwy returned alone to his comfortable lodges in this caer after the meal in Prince Berwyn's refectory hall, and he felt completely at home here as he had been visiting DunAlclwyd for as long as he could remember. He was gathering up some small luggage items from the lockers in his guest rooms, especially the greasy fleeced hooded cape which all would don this grey day, when his hunting alarm suddenly blazed and he swung around quickly, his heart leaping into his mouth. Incredibly, standing in his chamber and with the door closed behind him was the monstrous and menacing figure of Nêr Olwydd Hîr. Cadwy's eyes flew open, his left hand moving to grasp the scabbard that was not there without thought, just as his right moved to the missing dagger's grip, but he stilled both his hands in that instant as his heart hammered in his chest and his pulse pounded wildly at his throat. He stood straighter then, struggling to keep his face expressionless and his senses calm as he wondered how on earth such a mountain of a man could have sneaked up on him so effectively. If this ghost-warrior had been bent on murder this day Cadwy would have been in dire trouble. In fact, he realised with a cold flush that he would already be dead. This towering ghost-warrior bowed to him then with respect, but Cadwy's blood still fizzed with this knowledge, and he was alert and wide awake now as he returned the formality carefully without taking his eyes off this uninvited colossus.

"Forgive me honourable Prince Cadwy ap Cridas for this stealthy intrusion, but I am oath-sworn to my ward the Princess Eirwen to deliver you her felicitations in private." He growled, still looking fierce even though his visit was declared friendly.

"Eirwen, your ward?" Cadwy blurted out, breaking into a broad smile. "You are Eirwen's appointed noddwr?" He challenged the warrior, who nodded easily in response. "Lug's arse! That's the best news I've had in ages!" Cadwy said with feeling, still smiling as he held out his hand to the ghost-

warrior. "I've had no news, and it's been driving me to distraction I can tell you!" Cadwy added, his face lit with hope.

The ghost-warrior looked at Cadwy's hand for a fraction as he seemed surprised at the young prince's reaction, expecting jealousy perhaps. His big, brutal face broke into a smile of its own then and Olwydd grabbed Cadwy's hand, crushing it painfully as he pumped it up and down.

"Please sit good Nêr Olwydd and let us discuss our mutual charge, and I'm sure the main source of both our worry and our concerns."

He offered Olwydd a chair as the man's smile widened and he chuckled in agreement, nodding his huge head. The ferocious, sabre-toothed demon at this killer's throat pulsed menacingly as Cadwy tried to massage a little feeling back into his fingers, and he tried to ignore its ferocious challenge as his nerves began to settle. This man mountain made Cadwy's room look significantly smaller and darker, which was only relieved when Olwydd sat down on a convenient chair, making it look tiny, but at least a little more light was allowed back into the room.

As they spoke, it soon became clear that he was determined to get to know Cadwy a little better, and it looked as though he had already made a fine first impression. Cadwy was fascinated by this infamous ghost-warrior but no longer in a boyish, hero worshipful way, as he now wanted to know about Olwydd's character, and his honour far more than he did his accomplishments. Regardless of his doubtful future relationship with Eirwen, and despite this man's notorious reputation, he needed to know the measure of this man who was now sworn to her protection. He got the distinct impression before long however, that this judgement of character was a two-way thing and that his own integrity was under just as much scrutiny.



Chapter Twelve.

Following another long and gruelling day's riding, the Galedonian host with its attendant Albion honour guard tramped wearily through the surrounding hills of Selgofa and arrived eventually at the plain of Rhosmêl just as the light was fading. Emerging finally from the northern fringe of this vast forest and into this broad plain, the dark and conical silhouettes of the three landmark hills at its heart were stark against the fading light of this late summer dusk. The beacon atop the high lookout tower of the central hill was ablaze, and it flamed among the stars it reached so high. The crowns of both main mounts, including the further druid's hill were alight too with torches, and there were hundreds of similar torches lining the broad lanes which led down to Rhosmêl from all the gates of that huge and impressive fortress. The whole adjacent town and this huge maes had been festooned with lights and bunting, and all Rhosmêl was thronged with a huge crowd of people tonight, many standing at the northern edge of the town and waiting to bid these weary traveller's welcome. The real '*dathliad y croeso*' was planned for the following day, allowing these exhausted latecomers rest and time to recover from their long and hard-pressed journey. With the Lughnas festival well under way, the market in the centre of *stryd fawr* was the biggest it had ever been, as traders and craft workers had come from many miles away to capitalise on the expected crowds. Many dozens of large marquees and *pybyll-fawr* had been erected to entertain and to refresh the expected hordes of northern warriors and their followers. Every tent, stall and thatch in Tref Eil had been colourfully bedecked with bunting, and in an adjacent maes many hundreds of long rows of temporary *adlen* had been erected; shelters which had been built from lashed staves of timber and each covered in a rectangular sheet of waxed double-linen. These were made ready for if the rains came, and the countless visiting warriors needed shelter. Three vast firepits had been dug in the centre of this big field, each equipped

with rows of long dog-irons to roast the mountain of meat required to accommodate these same arriving soldiers. The surrounding forest for miles in every direction from the long-cleared plain of Eil and wider Rhosmêl had been emptied of almost all its game, as the Selgofan hunters had filled their hanging thatches to capacity with meat and it would take weeks for the area to be naturally repopulated.

As a weary Cadwy and Amr plodded over the old timber bridge spanning the Twaid, still leading this enormous army toward DunEil, he could see in the distance a long shield wall filled with his Albion spearmen, hurriedly forming a protective crescent in front of his father's triple-hill fortress. Each of Albion's honoured houses were present, and their proud, utterly familiar colours were represented on the various shields on display, shuffling now into place as these massed newcomers approached. Once formed up, this shield wall bristled with freshly sharpened spears and was filled with seasoned and grisly, 1st rank warriors of proven courage and ability, but this colourful shield wall was only one rank deep as it was purely a ceremonial formation, nonetheless it barred the way. Cadwy and his honour guard rode their horses at a walking pace toward it and onto the familiar, tussocked grass of the plain of Eil, followed by an uncountable number of mounted Galedonian warriors. They moved under a vast cloud of dust of their own making, and once over the wide timber bridge with a sound like rolling thunder, Cadwy's host spread out behind him. All then plodded toward DunEil in the weary, weaving manner of the long-distance rider. As they neared the three looming hills in the centre of this vast green space around them, a distant horn sounded, and the large double gates of the caer on the northern hill opened. Dozens of brightly coloured war chariots clattered down that broad, torchlit ramp, hauled by their matched pairs of horses and followed by hundreds more mounted warriors. In a few brief minutes, the ruling Selgofan gŵyrd had assembled behind their shield wall barrier made up of their vassal Albion combrogi drawn from Enouanta, Fotadina and Damnonia. Cadwy watched proudly as Berwyn's charioteers slewed their carbads into a wide arc before they too came to a halt at the wings of this blockade. Behind Cadwy, Ederus

and his gŵyrd halted as they took in this colourful demonstration, but the king of Galedon remained impassive in his saddle and not just from exhaustion. Cadwy took the pointed banner pole offered by Ioddo, and he shook out the glorious red and golden banner of Galedon which they had proudly carried with them. He unfurled this beautiful flag and held it aloft as was his duty. Galvanising Amr with his knees, the five other mounted gŵyrd of his honour guard moved forwards with him and toward the centre of this impressive shield wall facing them.

Gŵyr Turen ap Gamon pushed his way through these men and shields and stepped forwards from the heart of this defensive wall of painted leather and limewood. Albion's infamous, legendary champion strode toward Cadwy with his warface twisting his features and his hand gripping the hilt of his sword. Amr stopped about a dozen paces from Cadwy's oncoming tutor without signal and stood still as Cadwy dismounted and stepped forward for the challenge, walking the three paces to face his mentor Turen whilst holding the ceremonial banner of the old enemy aloft. Turen 'the deft' was dressed in his best kit for today's historic ceremony, and his mail shirt gleamed, as did the gold and iron rings around his powerful arms. Cridas' champion always had the hair scraped back from his face for battle in a tight quoit, but today it hung around his shoulders in dozens of plaits, each threaded with the metal knucklebones of his vanquished opponents. His fingers were thick with iron rings, forged from the weapons of those same warriors he had slain, another ceremonial concession. A beautiful and clearly heavy, boar shaped brooch in solid gold pinned his mantle, shouting his status as Albion's pencampwr to all, whilst the weave of his mantle and bracs was new and boldly sported the colours of his House. Turen's dancing warboots gleamed, and he looked absolutely magnificent and terrifying all at once. Cadwy got a small but sudden insight into what it must have been like to face this awesome man in impending combat, and his blood ran a little cooler for the perception.

"Who comes to my Lord King Cridas ap Caldorad's caer in arms?" Turen snarled this challenge at Cadwy as he came to face him, his

confrontational combat stance adding to his ferocity and making Cadwy a little nervous. Turen looked on the very point of drawing his great sword in anger, but Cadwy felt Bleddyn's big presence suddenly to his right and it calmed him.

"I do. I, Prince Cadwy ap Cridas ap Calgorad of Albion, and Godebog of Albion's sacred Honour Guard!" Cadwy responded in a loud voice, spiking the standard of Galedon in the ground beside him. His brash declaration carried to the assembled warriors of Albion, and they began to bang their spears against their shields in recognition of him, making Cadwy flush at the acknowledgment. Turen held his left arm aloft his face still a mask, keeping a grip on his sheathed sword with his right hand, and the soldiers behind him became silent again.

"Who do you bring to my Lord King Cridas' caer in arms, honourable Prince Cadwy ap Cridas?" Turen then demanded formally, pointing at the huge army of warriors spreading out behind him and who were still emerging slowly from the shadows of the northern treeline and plodding over the Twaid bridge four abreast.

"I bring the good and honourable King Ederus ap Ewin ap Durstus Fawr of Galedon to my father's dun, and who is oath bound to come here in peace." Cadwy declared to his tutor, before turning back to the crowded shield wall before him and his father's caer with a louder voice. "The king of Galedon comes to swear the great and sacred Llwgwaed of the northern Brythons with us. He comes to our lands with his famed and honourable gŵyrd and his valiant warriors, to ally with Albion on the holy night of Lughnas!" Cadwy said this loudly and proudly, finally reaching the hazard in his oath sworn duty. "I, and all my honour guard stand surety for his oath sworn peace with our lives, and I therefore demand the right of peaceful passage for all!" He called this out just as loudly, but with more power for this much practised demand. The spears started banging against limewood again and Turen ignored it now, smiling at Cadwy for the first time and giving him a supportive wink.

“As my king so desires, I give you and all your charges the right of peaceful passage Prince Cadwy ap Cridas!” Turen declared loudly and with a deep and formal bow.

Cadwy smiled back at his teacher before returning the bow just as formally. Once upright, Cadwy threw his arm up, making the awaited signal and his honour guard behind him parted down the middle, offering Ederus and his gŵyrd an approach to DunEil in honour. Turen made his own signal then and a young cornwr behind the shield wall blew the staccato all clear. King Cridas and the gŵyrd of Albion emerged then from on high, through the wide-open gates of DunEil and the tall, beacon lit guard towers to either side, to trot down the ramp to the plain below in all their magnificent glory and on the most fabulous horses. Turen’s ceremonial shield wall also parted down the middle, and a huge avenue was formed for the two groups of kings and lords as they approached each other, and all these people seemed to hold their breath.

Cadwy reclaimed the Galedonian banner from the turf and remounted, as did Bleddyn a heartbeat later. Both men gathered their honour guard and headed back toward the Galedonian noblemen approaching and who came to a halt in front of them once more. Cadwy bowed deeply and respectfully to Ederus from the saddle but was dismayed when the king gave him the briefest of nods in return and would not meet his eyes. Keeping his expression neutral, Cadwy bowed to his lords and exchanged banners once more with the huge stone faced Galedonian guard. He turned Amr then and unfurled the stylised, hump-backed boar banner of his own family, and he held it aloft proudly before returning to his position at the head of his men; his duties to Galedon complete. The warriors of Albion began to clatter their shields with their weapons again as their crown prince returned to his colours, and every man in the honour guard did the same including the starchy looking officers, who on this occasion surprisingly applauded the loudest. Order was soon returned, and as Cadwy’s honour guard peeled away, Ederus and his gŵyrd made their way through this bristling boulevard of armoured soldiers and horses, as Cridas

brought his own lords up to meet them. Finally, the opposing '*mintai reiol y cyfarchiad*' faced each other. These two 'royal groups of salutation' stopped twenty reeds apart, and Cridas dismounted, followed quickly by Ederus and his huge Wenyllon Pencampwr Gŵyr Lloerig ap Irfon, who looked like a man mountain and just as craggy. Turen re-joined his Liege Lord with a deep bow, and outside the theatre of war, the kings and champions of the old enemy met for the first time. As their pencampwr's introduced them, these two northern kings bowed to each other and then embraced, making the huge crowd of onlookers go wild. Pandemonium ensued across Fro Eil as this greeting was completed, and the tension broke in them all, smiles breaking out everywhere like flecks of white in a wind tossed ocean.

Turen and Lloerig eyed each other coolly, assessing each other amid this growing bedlam as all champions do, and Turen was the first to break the awkward stillness. He cracked a half-smile and went to hold his hand out, his left resting easily on the pommel of his sword. He was rewarded with an equally noncommittal smile from the big Wenyllon warrior as he shook Turen's hand with a nod of respect. Both men were keenly aware of the other's reputations, and even the long list of warriors they each had vanquished were well known to them both. Constrained as they were by these novel protocols, they would be entirely civil and cordial to each other as expected. Aware too that they may even be required to fight alongside each other in the coming months, each also knew that this undercurrent of challenge between them would remain just under the surface, and by the necessity of their positions would always be there. People could talk to them in shared company and find them gregarious and charming both, but few civilians would have any real idea of just how close to the surface their murderous impulse to slaughter each other would lie. These men would always be held in this subtle, ever present and weblike tension, and the same truth has always manifested itself when any two champions are placed in close proximity, and it always will, until the end of days. This celebrated meeting soon broke up as did the formations of lords and champions around it as everyone was exhausted.

The nobility of both nations were then led up to DunEil by these two northern kings, arm-in-arm. Shortly thereafter, a crowd of weary aristocrats headed off together to their places of refreshment and rest within Cridas' citadel or elsewhere whilst the nobles and elite businessmen followed on, all riding up the steep ramp to the hilltop fortress or to the temple complex on the third hill. The tref and the harbour below the three hills were soon teeming with warriors and werrin from both nations, and the alehouses and taverns were bursting to capacity and more.

The night followed a completely predictable pattern of events, as warrior challenged old enemy warrior to a seemingly unending range of diverse trials and tests, mostly the physical type of drinking, wrestling or arm wrestling, log throwing or stand up cyffi where only gloved fists were used. The Galedonians had brought three huge stones of destiny with them on big, custom-built wagons, and the lifting of these enormous round boulders on and off these substantial carts proved hugely popular with the larger individuals in this almost numberless mass of humanity. Whilst there was a great deal of enjoined singing, there were also many scuffles, loud arguments and several brawls. There had been one spectacular and hugely supported fight between two female warriors in the early hours. One was a Fachomagian nêr from the wild north-western reaches of Galedon whose sharp face was completely covered in swirling blue tattoos. She had clashed with a muscular Enouantan penaig over the affections of an Albion sergeant, and within a heartbeat they were about each other. This was no bout of *cyffi*, as the flash of honour-daggers was almost instant. As expected, these ferocious females would die before capitulating and so had to be forcibly separated by two gŵyr, four burly spearmen and a druid, but not before most had received many nicks and cuts amid the thrashing lunacy. Once disarmed, these two screeching denizens had been released and they came together like two battling ferrets. There was still no clear victor an hour later, even as they had fought themselves to a bellowing standstill. So, utterly exhausted, both women had been carried on high to the beer tents in vociferous honour

and to where the two battered and bruised combatants had been fated and ale soaked for hours. Despite, or perhaps in view of these high spirits, no one was killed or seriously hurt, and somehow, this fragile alliance of the old enemy contrived to survive its first night.

Long after a new day had begun and the sun had disappeared below the mountains of Fro Twaid Uchaf, Amren; Cridas' personal arwein bowed and showed King Ederus into his lord's private lodge. These two old enemy kings both bowed to each other briefly, before standing to face each other across the doeskin carpeting of this sumptuous chamber. Amren slipped out suppressing a yawn, closing the door behind him carefully and bowing to both men's champions who sat close by in the comfortable *lle-aros reiol*, relaxed but separate and aloof.

"Ederus my combrogi, what a pleasure and an honour it is to meet you in private at last!" Cridas said earnestly, speaking first as he was the host and holding out his hand, whilst holding too his gaze.

Ederus did not blink and stood stock still for a moment as tension slowly crept into this chamber. It was dispelled in an instant however as Ederus smiled back at Cridas, nodding slowly as he took his hand. Cridas pressed on, being the host and as honour was all.

"You honour me, my House and all my people Ederus, and I am convinced that without our great alliance in this coming war with those bloody Romans, Prydein would be mightily tested!" He added seriously.

Ederus gripped his shoulder with his free hand and his huge, craggy face softened finally.

"Ah, you do me great honour too Cridas ap Caldorad, and I know by the hair on Lug's great black arse, that together we will give this Roman braggart such a kicking, he'll never want to come back to Prydein again!" He declared gruffly, and the two great kings embraced once more, but this time it was a private embrace between two men. This was not for public consumption as this was the real thing; a forging of the first northern alliance ever between confirmed old enemies, and finding

themselves completely in accord their embrace deepened, which bode well for the good werrin of northern Prydein.

“Gwedy gwelet o doeth!” Cridas spoke the ancient invitation as they parted, his hand open toward the comfortable chair in front of the fire, and Ederus laughed.

“Ha, I’m not sure if I’m any wiser Cridas but I am older, so thank you!” He said with a nod.

“Please sit good Ederus, be at your ease and let us discuss the many matters of state we must agree to, and maybe one or two things of a more personal nature than that of our great alliance.” Cridas offered mysteriously his eyes twinkling, showing Ederus to his most comfortable chair by the roaring hearth. Ederus’ own eyes glittered at this subtle opening to a more personal matter, and this knowing look was no surprise at all to Cridas. Thoughtfully, he poured his very best wine into a pair of beautiful Italian glass goblets with tall and twisted stems which were coloured a deep cranberry. Before taking his own seat opposite, Cridas held up the glass for the obligatory toast, and again, being the host it was his duty.

“To the father, the grandfather and to the grandmother of all. To all our beloved ancestors, respect, honour and we will remember you forever!” He spoke the ancient salute with his right fist clenched over his heart, and Ederus sombrely repeated the toast before they both drank deeply.

“I met your tad you know?” Ederus told him, smacking his lips and causing Cridas’ eyebrows to arch as he took his seat opposite. “Mm, very good wine Cridas. Yes, it was the second western war and we had come to agree terms. I liked him a great deal, a very honest, forthright and an honourable man!” He added, a far-off look in his eyes.

“I didn’t know you had met my tad, although he never was one to talk about the wars, but I thank you Ederus for your fine words. I think he would be filled with pride were he here today to witness this meeting, the steps we are taking for peace between us and the great triadic llwgwaed

we are shortly to swear.” Cridas replied honestly, holding up his wine glass in a personal toast. “Cofion!” He muttered and they both drank deeply once more.

Ederus wiped the garnet drops from his moustache with a finger and nodded again with pleasure at its quality. He sat up a little straighter then and looked directly at Cridas in the chair opposite.

“Right then Cridas, let’s get down to business shall we?”

An hour later and as this new day’s darkness condensed, there were very few people abroad, as all the noblemen and women who had vanished up the steep, torchlit ramp and into the dry and more substantial lodges of the caer were soundly asleep. Whilst a few of the visiting soldiers still wobbled drunkenly around the tref and the harbour below, most were soundly asleep too, recovering for the day of festivities later and of course the second leg of their long southward journey to war the day following.

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The following days of travel were challenging, but the celebration at the arrival of this monstrous twin army on the great plain of *Fro Uswer* was equally welcoming, and just as noisy as the prior one in Albion. It appeared that all Breged had turned out to welcome this famous and awe inspiring, twin host of northern warriors who had toiled their way south to make their sacred alliance here. They had finally arrived at Bellnor’s vast and towering hilltop fortress, and it was a palisaded monstrosity with a huge and square tower at each corner and two further sub-towers in each outer facing wall. CaerUswer was thought to sit at the very heart of Prydein itself, and the broad and impressive ramp which rolled down from its enormous gates looked like a grey, paved tongue emerging from the dark mouth of that caer. That high black bastion dominated Fro Uswer almost centrally and on a low hill adjacent to a wide and accommodating bend in the much-worshipped afon Uswer, and it was where its huge timber bridge controlled the main crossing point of that broad and powerful river. All these visitor’s eyes were drawn upwards from this

impressive toll-bridge however and to the caer's age blackened and blood washed palisades. It was an awesome sight, framed and hued so beautifully as it was by Bel, sliding into sunset now behind the hills of Nudd to the west. Hundreds of chariots charged around the turf of Fro Uswir in an ostentatious and skilful display, wheeling tightly into much-practiced, swirling formations with their noble passengers whooping and brandishing their long swords or their spears in salute, some of them running back and forth along the pole in a hair-raising demonstration of their flamboyant excellence. As drums banged and horns blew, rank upon rank of immaculate cavalry officers and their magnificent horses trotted into two crescents, one forming before the high moorland of Rhôs y Gogledd to the distant northeast. The other crescent of horsemen moved to frame their host, assembling before the stark outline of Nudd's hills to the west, and the glow of the late and blooded sky behind made them stand out in sharp silhouette. More serried ranks of shield-locked spearmen poured forth to form this primary crescent of defence, and dozens of mounted royals, gŵyrd and the nobility of Breganta along with the vassal tribes of all Breged stood imperiously behind them. A long note vibrated the air then and as a Carfetan cornwr blew one of their huge Auroch battle-horns, and which was abruptly joined by a responding, lamentable and deep bass lowing. This came from a dozen horse borne brass *carnyx* with their tall necks and their grotesque, beastly faces and who's operators had answered this call, galvanising their mounts. As this squadron of mounted carnyx bearers traversed Fro Uswir at the gallop with their long pennants streaming, the haunting lament of their tall and swanlike metal instruments filled the evening air, and so these two northern armies approached this monstrous and palisaded citadel ahead of them to this undulating but haunting melody. CaerUswir towered above and behind this Bregantan host which faced them now, supported by the massed vassal warriors from the Carfetau, Paurisa and Gabrantoficau. Archers from Seganta and fierce viper-warriors of the Coritanau made up this colourful alliance of Breged and who stoically

faced this vast, twin host now approaching to the walking thunder of thousands of hooves.

The royals, their gŵyrd, the wealthy nobles and all the werrin present would take with them to the grave the unforgettable sight of the three greatest kings of northern Prydein embracing warmly on the lush grass of this vale, surrounded by a disparate but cheering multitude. Even as all knew the true and holy alliance would not be made official or sanctified until tomorrow, everyone who witnessed it knew beyond doubt that this was where the real alliance had been forged, on the lumpen turf of Fro Uswer and in front of their tear-filled eyes. This historic meeting of the kings Ederus, Cridas and Bellnor would be sung by bards and cantorion for ever, and all the Prydeinig descendants of these people would know of these momentous and portentous events until the very end of days. There was a clear accord and a mutual regard between the combined triad of hands and the rugged, smiling faces of these kings of kings, and the pandemonium that followed this emotional meeting was like a rush of rolling thunder. The sheer joy of this union was deeply felt by all watching, spellbound, and the resulting celebrations were ecstatic as people released their feelings of savage joy with whoops and jubilant yells as they danced on the grass. The lowing sound from the bronze carnyx operators filled the air once more along with the thunder of their hooves, and cornwrs began to blow and drummers began to hammer their elk skins in the frantic cacophony so loved by these people.

Soon, and as a mist laden dusk descended slowly to the plain of Uswer like a thick woollen blanket, a quietness settled softly on these people with the darkness. Peace and harmony had been enjoyed by every single person here, and as they all crushed their bracken or the grass of their allotted piece of ground under them in this vast plain in a deep and exhausted sleep, even the assembled Gods seemed content. As they bedded down for this historic night under their scraps of waxed canvas, the werrin here and across Prydein prayed that their attendant Gods had arrayed themselves behind the revered dark God of the Underworld

himself now risen; Arglwydd Lug Ddu, and whose black mantle always matched the stygian feathers of the raven on his shoulder. They hoped too that Lug looked down upon them as they awaited his impending honour, and Lughnas: his own coming day of celebration, which serious and truly ancient observations could prove vital if they were going to win this war of invasion everyone knew was coming.

It seemed as though all Prydein had been assembled on Fro Uswr on this bright but blustery morning. With the crucial harvest and a swiftly approaching autumn on the horizon, it was a day which promised some welcome rain but plenty of intermittent sunshine too. All of which buoyed the optimistic and hopeful attitude of these thousands of people as they slowly woke themselves up to the first birdsong. As Bel appeared cheerfully once more over Rhôs y Gogledd, the whole plain of Uswr was alive with slowly moving people, all seeking food and drink to break their fast and to prepare for the day's coming ceremonies. An enormous conclave of nationally important druids had met on this wide swath of land at midnight, a little over six hours previously. Here, they had burned a gigantic wicker effigy of a man of over fifty feet in height, filled with sacrificial offerings of food, drink, animals and humans. All had been tethered to the stout branches within and which had made up the monstrous man shaped, votive pyre. It had been lit with great ceremony, led by HênDdu himself. Over the droning litany from those hundreds of white robed and tonsured priests was heard the keening, nerve shredding screaming coming from that effigy as the flames roared and crackled upwards, consuming all to the glory of the dark lord, eventually even the terrified screams of the dying within. The uati had been in their element and had gained much insight from that fraught ceremony. That smoking husk now lay in ruins, and the charred and greasy remains of its two giant feet were separated by a recent addition in the form of a large, stone *allor y derwydd*. The sacred ground which now surrounded this spirit wreathed 'druid's altar' was a huge, scorched circle in the grass. It still reeked of the fire and the congealed and blackened mess which now supported this crude and ancient looking stone edifice, now at the black heart of this

spiritually prepared portal. The druids were long gone, likely still on their bracken as no doubt their mead-soaked celebrations following the successful sacrificial ritual had gone on into the early hours. The stewards of their holy order still toiled in their name however, and a gang of these burly men were digging post holes to insert the twenty-one tall, beacon torches around the perimeter of this sacred and now sanctified circle of white quartz stones, but even without them, no one would be foolish enough to actually cross its spirit guarded threshold. The guards on the battlements above these slowly stirring people yawned in this early dawn, and they watched those druid's stewards toil around that huge scorch mark with little interest, stoically awaiting their relief with empty stomachs as the land came slowly alive around and below them.

Cadwy felt tired this morning. His eyes were gritty from the exhaustion of this unbelievable week, and with a pale, infant dawn struggling to penetrate the thick wool of the drapes in this unfamiliar chamber, he rose from this strange but comfortable bed with a groan. The hard travelling had left his body aching, with his buttocks feeling bruised and abused, so he stretched himself awake slowly and painfully. Sluicing his face in the cold water of a handy basin, he relished the cold shock as he stood tall for this new day, breathing deeply as he dried off with a linen towel. Dywel his arwein came into the room and bade him a cheery good morning, then the young squire quickly sorted out his clothes and accoutrements for the day ahead from his luggage. Dywel helped him pull on the stout, black leather riding boots of his order as he had come to love them for their comfort and superb quality, and they shone now with the coat of fresh lanolin this young lad had lovingly applied to them. Cadwy only wore the crude, gathered toe shoe of the werrin when he was relaxing in his lodges, as although they were rudimentary and utterly unfashionable in social circles, he loved their simple design and their comfort. These tall and stout leather boots however had been hand-made to fit him by an indentured cobbler of the order of the honour keepers, one who possessed the very highest skill and reputation, and Cadwy loved them. However, the rest of his clothing for today was thankfully casual.

Led by Dywel to the huge refectory in the inner keep of this vast fortress, Cadwy felt a little more human, and he looked around the smoky interior of this huge Bregedian *llŷs bwyta* for his cyfail. It was one of the biggest 'eating halls' he had ever seen, and it was thronged with people, even this early. He caught a wave from Hefin in a far corner, sitting around a long, benched table, and the rest of his cyfail awaited him there. Grabbing some food and a log of half-ale from the serving tables along with everyone else, Cadwy crossed this long and deeply unfamiliar hall to join his friends, pleased that Major Brast and Meyrug were both also there, being an integral part of his cyfail now. These two soldiers now conversed with the nobles of his cyfail as men, although respectfully as they were certainly not equals, but the normal, often strangulating protocols which bound their feudal societies were relaxed a great deal in this group, and all Cadwy's friends had spoken well of these two werrin officers. King Cridas too had congratulated him on his ideas for his *Order of the Honour Keepers*, and his tad had told him that his '*el y werrin*' was the purest form of leadership in his sagacious opinion, and that it had confirmed his belief in him. His father's felicitations had made him proud and his heart swell, and he was buoyed by these advances in life still, even this tired and this early. Cadwy also relished in the feeling of casual dress this morning, glad he was out of the tight-fitting leather bracs and the heavy breast plate and sable cloak of his ceremonial office. He wore a simple but beautifully made suit of bracs and mantle today in a pale mimosa and damson weave, and it was clasped with a silver, boar's head brooch which emphasised the glory of the silver torc at his throat.

"Good morning my prince!" Hefin bade him jovially with a smile, and all around this big table echoed his greeting.

Cadwy smiled and bowed to them all, returning the greeting formally before sliding onto the bench alongside Bleddyn and tucking into his food. Within moments, the conversation flowed again and their conversation revolved around this vast and amazing fortress, the immense and eye-catching gathering within it, the impending and sacred Lughnas rituals to

their great black God which they were all shortly to play a part in, and of course the fraught *llwgwaed* procedure planned for midnight tonight.

"I have never seen so many people in one cruching place!" Bleddyn cursed around a mouthful of half-ale, his beard full of suds as he looked at the packed seats around this vast and pillared eating hall and the dozens of stewards rushing about it.

"I know! The tref was heaving last night and you couldn't get near a barrel-table to get served!" Ioddo complained. "A young lady had to fetch my ale for me all night!" He added with a wink, and that was all it took to start them off again. They were soon back to form, insulting and cursing each other soundly and causing much quiet laughter between them. Despite his fatigue, it made him smile, but Cadwy's smile froze on his face amid this bickering and his eyes suddenly blazed. Hefin was the only one to notice.

"Cadwy what's wrong?" Concern creased Hefin's forehead as he reached out and grabbed Cadwy's wrist across the table.

Hefin turned his head to follow Cadwy's gaze, but it was not immediately clear what could have caused that shocked expression. Their friends around this table became quiet, and they all too looked to the front of this huge hall and its big oak door, but at what exactly none of them quite knew. Hefin felt Cadwy's arm stiffen under his grip and then he too saw what had caused his prince such consternation, as a flame haired beauty graced this long refectory hall. She had been hidden by the gaudily decorated pillars and all these people milling about them until now, and this aristocratic vision of loveliness seemed to glide toward the food tables. Every man around this table drew breath at the sight of Princess Eirwen of Galedon, as although she was dressed in simple riding clothes, the cut and quality of her attire was obvious. Every man in this great hall would have agreed; that spectacular young lady would have looked simply stunning even in a torn and grubby old goatskin. Bleddyn whistled softly beside Cadwy, but even he knew to keep his mouth shut on this occasion. Cadwy's agonised weeks of longing compelled him to stand without

thought, and with his heart banging in his throat and his nerves jangling, he left this table on legs as stiff as a corpse's. With her back to him, Eirwen was absently spooning some poached eggs onto a plate of toasted bread as he walked towards her in a daze, approaching her slowly through this crowd as if driven onwards by some unknown, irresistible force. He was ten reeds away from her and figuring out what he was going to say when he suddenly felt quite ill. He stopped dead in his tracks, ten reeds from the food tables and Eirwen as the strangest feeling had gripped him powerfully, in his mind oddly rather than his body but none the less sickening and debilitating. Then the hunting alarm blazed in the back of his head. A firm hand gripped his right elbow at that same moment, and Cadwy was utterly amazed to see his Aunt Meleri holding his arm. The strange, sickly and unsettling feeling vanished without trace at her first touch, and he was stunned at her ability to appear so abruptly and so soundlessly at his side, having no appreciation of the anticipation, the timing or the skill required.

"No Cadwy bach." She said quietly to him, holding onto his arm and turning him away, and he felt powerless to resist. "Now is not the time my boy! Stick to our plan or all our efforts will be undone. You will get one chance at this Cadwy and one only, so go and re-join your cyfail and hold your water!" She commanded him, her eyes blazing briefly with a deep fire before she released his arm, and then she just wandered off toward the food.

Cadwy, dazed and a little confused returned to his friends on hollow legs, and all he wanted was his beer as he suddenly had no appetite but a terrible thirst. Looking back down the length of this long and peculiar hall again as he drained his log of honeyed ale, Eirwen had vanished like a wraith and was nowhere to be seen.

"All well Cadwy?" Hefin asked for them all and Cadwy nodded slowly in response, suppressing a belch and wiping his mouth, but his mind was elsewhere and in turmoil still. He was sustained however by the plans mentioned by his great aunt and all the preparations which had been

made on his behalf and alloyed to his natural optimism and his normally ebullient good spirits, he calmed himself. Leaning on the table, Cadwy took a deep breath and let it out in a *whoosh* as his wits and his composure returned, and he was soon back to his bright, normal self. He thumped the empty beer log back on the table and nodded, finally accepting that he was involved in nothing short of a waiting game and sitting down again, he grinned at Hefin.

"All is well my loyal cyfail. So, suggestions on how we fill this historic day in Breganta and whilst we eagerly await Arglwydd Lug Ddu's nigh-time festivities?" He enquired with a wolfish grin, looking around at their eager faces with raised eyebrows.

* * * * *

Over thirty thousand, spiritually charged people surrounded the torchlit clearing on the plain of Usver and under a sharply clear night. The heavens above were filled with a myriad glittering stars above them, and the countless heads of these people were awash with their cold and impersonal light. The bright, luminous wedge of an inquisitive halfmoon also cast its pale-yellow glow over these proceedings, and the people under it watched this unfolding event with a growing and superstitious fascination. The huge ring of destiny was sealed, as twenty-one arch-druids now faced outwards from the altar at its centre and surrounded this scorched circle of earth. They stood in their long white gowns around the circumference of this holy ground and between each of the tall burning beacons with their arms solemnly outstretched, their fingertips almost touching the poles. The hushed atmosphere of this vast space was one of awestruck tension now, and all stood agog and wide eyed as the prime druid of Prydein in all his glory finally made his stunning appearance. The ancient stone altar which had been placed in the centre of this burned space, and where many had perished in the searing heat of the votive man now took pride of place and acted as the druid's black portal to the Underworld.

HênDdu now held centre-stage before his grisly altar with his arms outspread, and with his high brow gleaming in the torchlight beneath the gold *acorn* crown, all eyes were on this all-powerful individual in all his pomp. The stunning, deeply embossed and solid gold collar below the acorn crown matched its buttery yellow gleam, and the brif-druid of Prydein looked magnificent and terrifying all at once in his gleaming regalia. This tall arch-druid then began this sacred process with a sonorous litany to all his Gods and in his surreal and unsettling voice. Brought forth by his arch-druid Einion at the reedy warble of a druid's deer horn, the fabulous state sword of Prydein took its honoured place at the front of this gnarled and chipped altar, and a beautiful silver cauldron shared the roughly hewn surface with this sacred national icon. The three priceless but very different crowns of the assembled kings also sat alongside each other on this cold stone, and all three were touching forming a most sacred symbol. Two tall and roaring torches burned brightly to either side of this altar, and together with the encircling ring of the same, they lit this tableaux within this sacred circle and beyond. This wavering glow fell on the first twenty or so enraptured ranks of encircling watchers, and with the uncountable ranks of people stretched out behind them vanishing into the gloom of the starlit distance, it made a memorable sight. The brif-druid's assistants; Guron, Einion and Drem stood to one side, arms out too in support of their master as the outer ring of druids filed away then, back to their adjacent conclave. The gŵyrd and the aristocracy shuffled forward to approach the now open sacred circle, and the ceremony began to another warble of deer horn.

During the following drawn out and blood soaked, ceremonious procedure, a man and a woman, a bull and a cow, a stallion and a mare, a pig and a sow, a ram and an ewe, a dog and a bitch and a cock and hen had all been sacrificed together. A token part of their blood had been collected in this great silver cauldron by the druids which sat again on the altar now. It steamed into the night air with the freshness of its blended contents and as the still twitching carcasses were being dragged away. These were expertly dismembered by certain specialist druids, who sorted and

rearranged these body parts and then fixed them back together again with double-ended, sharpened and barbed sticks to fashion blood curdling and hideous, shapeshifted monsters of eternal nightmare out of them and to the glory of Arglwydd Lug Ddu. Once these abominations had been assembled, they were deposited in offering to their bleak God of darkness in a nearby peat bog to much incantation and more prayer. A swirling *tarth y derwydd* appeared then around HênDdu's bare feet as he prayed, and these misty, druid-born tentacles began to insinuate themselves about the stone altar. They reached out infinitely slowly to the surrounding onlookers, deliberately wrapping their spirit fingers around their legs and caressing them with a ghostly touch, unnerving many and making them back fearfully away. They were brought up short by the immovable multitude behind however and were thus forced to accept the terror of the 'druid's mist' in dumb and fascinated dread. This living, spirit formed mist thickened around AurArian's bare feet as the litany continued and as the temperature dropped noticeably in this huge circle. The lords and the wealthy nobility at the front of this encircling horde felt this chill and became fearful themselves, their eyes becoming wide, and all kissed their iron in superstitious fear.

AurArian Aruchel had, in his infinite wisdom called for this unique declaration of a three-way 'royal unity' to be made immediately after the ancient rituals of Lughnas which is not uncommon, as Lughnas was ever the season for warfare, but it was also the season for matters of the heart. A truly ancient ceremony was then performed by the brif-druid, thought to have been brought from Babylonia with the Phoenicians those eons ago and which required the fervent prayers of all his druids at the altar and involved the solemn feeding of this huge horde of people with flat cakes. These had been made by the aristocracy *for* their werrin, using the first cut ears of grain this morning at dawn, of which an offering was first made to the dark lord himself on this altar tonight. As these eager druids entreated Lug with their arms outstretched in supplication, a ritual meal of this new food was then handed out by hundreds of arwein with large wicker baskets, who passed through this multitude distributing small

parcels of wrapped burdock leaves. Each packet contained a round flat cake along with a handful of bilberries and hazelnuts, for which everyone was grateful and accepted them eagerly with a smile and a nod. Now the imperative blessings, the prayers and the traditional offerings had been made to Arglwydd Lug Ddu, and the nobles' enduring responsibilities to their werrin had been discharged, the all-important triadic oath of *undeb reiol* could take place for the first time in Prydeinig history. HênDdu was keen to establish this final part of the ceremony to Arglwydd Lug Ddu before he could move on to the crucial 'national declaration', as it was one of his highest honours and a most vital duty. The brif-druid knew his people well and their proclivity to celebrate, and so he allowed them these minutes to vent their pent-up fears and concerns of recent times, allowing them the time to turn their worries into joyful and happy emotions of hope and even glory.

Some minutes later, a long and haunting note from a druid's stag horn sounded from somewhere distant, and these surrounding nobles began to shuffle backwards and to the sides as previously instructed, revealing three equidistant wedge formations of warriors, on the ground and facing the altar. This triad of converging formations stood behind the three great kings of northern Prydein, and Ederus, Cridas and Bellnor stepped up to the altar then in their best finery and from three ley-line orientated directions, and their hosts shuffled up behind them. These famous kings glittered in the torchlight; the swirling gold and silver inlays on their armour and accoutrements extraordinary, and yet their bare heads drew all eyes in astonished awe, as to see your monarch once in your life is a blessing, but this was something else entirely. Nobody was able to tear their incredulous gaze from this rare and glorious ceremony, nor the incredible image of these three great northern kings for even a heartbeat. Each king now stood facing the altar, coming from three highly significant directions, and each was standing at the pinnacle of his assembled House, facing his own stunning crown. Their chosen men were drawn into three huge, horizontal pyramids of warriors standing to attention behind them, beginning with two princes behind the kings and then three gŵyr in the

spaces behind the princes, then four gŵyr behind them and then six and so on, out past the ring of torches for eleven concentric circles and to where all three tribes met once more. These three wedge formations of disparate warriors ended at a great ring of mail clad men, all also standing to strict attention and shoulder-to-shoulder. Outside this unbroken ring of steel, the werrin were too packed shoulder to shoulder, and sight of this warm, shifting mass of people faded into the shadowed distance. Three hosts, formed into eleven ranks totalling sixty-six men each were ever the numbers of power, and HênDdu had arranged it thus for the *Dark Lord*. Now all was in place, *He* and all Prydein's deities may look down and see the round, wheel-like shield of this Brythonic triad made real in their honour and into a *triskele* from the living bodies of their worshipful subjects. In this unique way and making a most graceful royal *boss* to this great spiritual shield of HênDdu's construction, the three kings faced each other and at the pointed tips of the armies they represented.

Ederus, Cridas and Bellnor drew their Brythonic honour daggers at a nod from the imperious HênDdu, presenting them with their left hands so that they almost touched over the wide rim of the fantastically sculpted silver cauldron placed alongside their crowns, almost full as it was with the thickening blend of its still steaming contents. With the support of his arch-druids, HênDdu began both the ancient and the newly formed prayers to the assembled Gods for this unique occasion and turned to nod the signal to these three sovereigns. Each then grabbed the honed blades in the bare fingers of their right hands and drew back the blades deliberately. The sacred rivulets of royal blood began to flow into the cauldron, and horns blared and drums banged. Ederus, Cridas and Bellnor then swore the inviolate blood-oath of triadic undeb, together and to HênDdu's prompting. Their bleeding hands were clasped tightly together as they solemnly spoke both the long forgotten and the recently created words of their priesthood, their blending, regal lifeblood dribbling into the clotting mess already in the embossed silver bowl. HênDdu then wrapped a square of pristine white linen over the knot of bleeding royal hands, and the sacred blood-oath was sworn. With this primordial and rarest of

procedures complete, the sacred unity of this holy triad was finally achieved, and the druid threw his arms wide to confirm it.

“Caffo undeb!” He roared, and over thirty thousand voices roared back at him in jubilation.

An almost uncontrollable excitement gripped these people now, and the sound that came from them was like the subterranean rumble of a surrounding earthquake. Amid the din of the bronze carnyx’ and brass horns blowing, elk-skin drums banging and the werrin’s excited chattering and whooping, the ever-present Gods were surely joyful. Ederus, Cridas and Bellnor still gripped each other’s right hands, and their left hands were now too enjoined, as they had dispensed with the cloth and had formed a bloody knot of six royal, human hands. They were grinning like fools at each other now too over this altar, each gripped by a fascinating and completely novel set of emotions, but it was clear to all who witnessed this historic event that all three were completely committed to the oath, and that the triadic unity they had just formed was a true and an honourable one. All here hoped that Rome’s very foundations would quake at the news, and all that remained now was the crucial demand of the nation as pertaining to these northern kingdoms. These assembled Prydeinig were now required to choose the direction of the *datganiad gwladol*, and this ‘national declaration’ was one of the oldest ceremonies in Prydein’s long and illustrious history. It could be demanded at any time by the druidic and royal councils and not just during the four main annual festivals, but in every event it was a fearsome and terrible challenge put before these people by their animated priests, but one which was vital if these people were to be stirred into allied action. HênDdu nodded his approval at these three smiling kings, and people were dancing and singing where they stood around them as nobody could move more than a few steps, but all were happy in their confinement. Abruptly, the front rows of these happy gŵyrd and nobility fell silent as a handsome young couple had pushed their way through them to do the unthinkable. Hand in hand, this tall and noble pair stepped over the ring of white crystal rocks

between two of the tall, blazing beacons and then walked boldly into the sacred druid's portal. All eyes grew when it became apparent who these famous people were, and rings of whispered gossip exploded quietly outwards like waves in a pool of tar. HênDdu turned on them as quick as a stoat, his hard face twisted with a fearful scowl.

"Who dares break a druid's sacred circle?" He challenged them in his terrifying voice, now buzzing angrily.

"I do! Crown Prince Cadwy ap Cridas of Selgofa and Albion!" Cadwy declared proudly and loudly, standing to strict attention, his chin jutting and his eyes blazing with passion from his pale face as he looked at the terrifying HênDdu at his altar. "And I claim the ancient royal right of *cynnig y priodas reiol!*" He stated equally loudly, letting his gimlet eyes sweep the circle of well-dressed nobles around him in search of any sign of opposition and as a hungry hawk seeks a hare.

"And I too break the sacred circle!" Eirwen declared just as loudly alongside him. "I am Princess Eirwen ferch Ederus of Galedon, and I also claim my ancient and regal right of *cynnig y priodas reiol!*" She said equally boldly at his side, the knuckles of their conjoined hands white with the pressure of their grip on each other. As the attention of all these people was on this striking, proud but nervous couple within the druid's portal, Lady Meleri of the Damnoniau and Lady Karych of the Wenyllon stepped into this scorched circle from behind the altar, and these two arch-druidens approached regally in their flowing white gowns. Their silver jewellery shone bright in this torchlight, and the tiaras of mistletoe on their noble heads ensured their sanctity.

HênDdu smiled then, a terrible thing in itself, but it was a smile of intuitive knowledge as he did not need to turn around to know that two more people had entered his circle, nor to know the identity of these two latest comers, as their strong and unmistakeable spirit auras were as recognisable to him as their familiar faces. This brif-druid knew too that there were very few circumstances that could legally interrupt a druid-led religious ceremony in this way, especially one of his and one of this

magnitude. There was only one really, but this aged edict had not been evoked for so many generations, it had passed from most people's memories. In fact, and perhaps coincidentally he had only recently been involved in a very long, deep and detailed discussion with these same two druidens on the exact same, ancient and long-forgotten royal law and the correct protocols required to evoke it. Common sense and politeness demanded that this interruption be done after all the Gods-sworn ritual was done, as if it had been attempted after the next and final part of this ceremony their pleas would have been drowned out in the ensuing bedlam. The puppeteers of this particular venture had planned long and hard for this event, whilst much behind the scenes machination had been conducted and many sacrifices made, with a single final goal; to get Cadwy and Eirwen into the burned circle and to make their claim, *after* all the rites of Lughnas were done and the sacred and royal triple-llwgwaed sworn, but more essentially *before* the final declaration began.

HênDdu relented, holding his right arm open in the clear signal of invitation, and this young, regal couple stepped up to the front of his altar and turned to face the massed werrin of northern Prydein. Lady Karych of Galedon moved to Eirwen's left and put her hand in personal and official support on the princess' arm. Their eyes met and Karych nodded her support and approval. Lady Meleri of Albion materialised at Cadwy's right elbow at that moment and did the same for her beloved grandnephew. Their eyes locked for long moments, and then Cadwy smiled at his beloved *hênmodryb*, completely filled with confidence now and imbued with an unshakeable belief that he was doing the right thing. Cadwy's chest filled, his eyes glinted, and his chin came up again as he turned to face AurArian Aruchel, the dread brif-druid of Prydein.

"We evoke the ancient rites of royal handfasting *intercedence* and we seek to break the claim of any previously proposed handfasting to either and to both of us, as is our ancient royal right. Before all the Gods of Prydein I swear this solemn oath, that we are determined to become man and woman, husband and wife, father and mother somewhere in this

world!" Cadwy said the correct words and loudly to all, his heart pounding. He turned to Eirwen and nodded his support.

"I desire the same!" Eirwen declared boldly at his side. "I am determined to be woman, wife and mother with Cadwy ap Cridas and no other! I too evoke and rightfully claim the ancient royal rites of *cynnig y priodas reiol* as I was but a child when promised, and so, before our assembled Gods, I too swear a solemn oath that we are determined to live as one, here in eternal bliss in our beloved Prydain or elsewhere in the world as may be dictated." Eirwen spoke up beside him, but there was a small break to her voice at these last, much-practiced words, testimony to the extreme discomfort and the stress of this proposal of permanent exile, and their knuckles whitened. A low moan came from the audience, and a few "No's" were heard at this appalling possible outcome. HênDdu ignored these outbursts, his blazing, chaotic eyes never leaving Cadwy's.

"Who gives you *llaw y gŵyr* Prince Cadwy ap Cridas? The groom's authority?" He challenged this pale young prince with a frown, and the Honourable Ddugesî Meleri of the Myrun Islands and arch-druiden of Albion stepped forward. Her throat seemed to swell a little as she spoke with her voice of power, and she addressed this massed audience with a challenging expression.

"As a mother names her son, she alone gives him the right and the authority to bear arms in service to his lord, and she also gives him permission to take a wife!" She declared loudly, and all around nodded at this age-old Brythonic wisdom. "I, brif-druiden and Ddugesî of Albion, Lady Meleri ferch Calgus Fawr; I give Cadwy ap Cridas his right of *llaw y gŵyr* in his mother's stead, as she is no longer in this world and as is my right!" She ended strongly, and this brif-druiden looked around these assembled lords, tumon and other nobles for dissent, but none were brave or foolish enough and nobody dared meet her steely gaze at that moment. HênDdu nodded acceptance of this statement from the druiden before turning, but his fearsome scowl remained.

“Who speaks for *Anrhydedd y Gawres*?” He demanded, and Lady Karych stepped forward in support of her charge’s honour and her chastity, and the legalities at least were complete.

Ederus entered this scorched circle abruptly, clearly in a foul mood, and he stumped around the altar to stand close to Lady Karych and his wilful daughter, who now refused to meet his withering gaze. Whichever antiquated and long forgotten law these druidens had unearthed to make this interruption a legal manoeuvre, it was still a procedure fraught with risk, borne out now by the merciless look on the great king of Galedon’s face.

“Lloerig!” Ederus growled, looking at the pair of rash, irresponsible fools who had dared to interrupt such an important and vital, national ceremony, and attempt to make him look foolish before the royals, nobles and gŵyrd of all northern Prydein. His face was a mask, all bonhomie and fraternal goodwill vanished. His towering pencampwr Lloerig ap Irfon brushed two aristocrats aside brusquely, coming to stand in front of his liege lord, and he snarled at Cadwy, growling his murderous intent far more convincingly than the inhuman skull which screamed soundlessly from his polished breastplate. This huge champion’s face twisted into a rictus of violent challenge and his right hand curled dangerously around the hilt of his sword. Cadwy paled at this dread sight and almost took a backward step as the enormous bulk of Ederus’ glowering champion seemed to loom and block all else from his vision.

“Turen!” Cadwy heard his tad’s deep voice bark behind him, and almost instantaneously, Turen ap Gamon ghosted elegantly past him to face the huge Fachomagian champion. This infamous sword master and the champion of all Albion adopted his own attack posture in front of Cadwy and in protection of his prince, and his hand also gripped the hilt of his sword. Cadwy’s heart felt as though it was falling through him to the ground, and his blood turned to ice water as he moved Eirwen behind him with his heart galloping. He was horrified at the way this was going, and the bowstring tension of this sharply escalating situation was suddenly

palpable. Many faces of the surrounding people had changed from one's of ecstatic pleasure and were now pale and drawn with apprehension at this strange and unsettling event. The news was carried outwards to the masses behind like rings in water this time, but by necessity still in breathless whispers. An occasion which had been a communal and joyous celebration just moments ago was turned on its head in an instant, and it now looked as if blood was about to be spilled over a woman. The Gods in their temples must have been beside themselves with mirth as they kicked that musty old chestnut around their marble halls.

"Don't tad!" Eirwen wailed, her face a tragic picture of shock and uncertainty as she looked around Cadwy, her confidence shattered by this calamitous turn of events and which all here knew could overturn everything achieved this night.

Ederus turned to his daughter then and as she looked at him for the first time, the plaintive plea clear on her beautiful young face. His heart constricted with his love for her, and he relented, his shoulders dropping slightly. Cridas approached him then, a smirk creasing one corner of his mouth.

"Should we put them out of their misery now combrogi? I think they might just have learned their lesson!" He asked Ederus, putting his arm around the king of Galedon's shoulders in a familiar, completely amicable way. Ederus looked back at the king of Albion and could hold his scowl no longer. His craggy face broke into a broad and bushy smile of his own, and he threw his right arm about Cridas' waist.

"Yes Cridas my honourable friend, I think the time has come." Ederus beamed, and the two kings embraced, whilst King Bellnor and his gŵyrd applauded behind them, all smiling.

Cadwy and Eirwen looked at each other in stunned confusion, both wondering what on earth was going on. They noticed too that both Ladies Karych and Meleri were smiling and laughing, whilst Lloerig and Turen were no longer at the very point of killing each other, in fact, they were

leaning on each other like lifelong friends, both grinning fit to bust. The atmosphere had changed again just as suddenly, and everyone's spirits were suddenly lifted along with the mood and people began to dance and celebrate again.

"We have known all along daughter about your plans, and Cridas and I are in complete agreement on the subject, but this play was to teach you both a lesson for creeping around behind our backs! However, Cridas and I have persuaded Prince Galan to speak to his brother Wrad, and Cridas has sent an extremely generous sarhaed to soften the broken marriage proposal. But at the end of the day daughter, Cridas and I had to agree that you have both taught us something too. Life can be perilously short; too short to live in soulless duty, and your love for each other cannot be denied as it is obvious and true to all. It blazes from you both like the summer sun in a cloudless sky." Ederus said more softly, looking down his long nose at them both. "Together my children and for reasons beyond my understanding, you are far greater than the sum of your two individual parts, which is a rare thing. Your handfasting could also help heal old wounds and maybe even join our two nations together in a lasting alliance, and perhaps establish Gogledd Prydain once and for all as the northern powerhouse we should have made it decades ago." He declared proudly, smiling warmly at Eirwen and Cadwy, who both still had their mouths hanging. "Cridas and I have put all our old acrimonies and differences aside, and we are both delighted to support your 'cynnig y priodas', and we look forward with great pleasure to the tying of your hands and to our becoming one big family, in one year and a day or less." Ederus qualified with a smile and a nod to Cadwy, who stood rooted with a pink neck, still not quite believing his ears.

"You mean....?"

"I mean, you should come and embrace your future father-in-law Cadwy, before he changes his mind!" Ederus advised him sagely, but with a twinkle in his eye, and he was blessed with a most radiant smile which erupted from the boy.

Cadwy stepped forwards with a delirious look on his face, but he was swept aside by Eirwen as she flew into her father's arms. Ederus was just as surprised, but utterly delighted as he enveloped his beautiful daughter in his arms. Cridas came up behind Cadwy then and placed both his big hands on his son's shoulders.

"Well done Cadwy. Apologies for the play acting, but it was a small concession I was pleased to make. I am happy for you both." He told him quietly, and Cadwy grabbed his father's right hand in his own.

"I am truly blessed and honoured to have been sired by such a man as you tad." Cadwy responded seriously and stood to wait his turn with his eyes glistening to formally greet King Ederus of Galedon, his future *Chwegrún*.

"Oh tad, I do love you!" Eirwen sobbed, clinging to him. "I know I disappoint you and I'm often selfish, irresponsible and rash and I don't tell you I love you enough, but I do!" She kissed him, grabbing his beard as she had as a child on his knee, and Ederus roared with laughter.

"Olwydd told me what you did to that brigand in the cave my child, and I'm rather fond of my life!" He said with a grin, and Eirwen's responding laughter was a thing of pure joy.

All who looked on shared this joy. All the women and even a few of the men's eyes were wet with the emotional scenario playing out before them on this ring of burned grass. All except one late arrival; a black-haired and bearded, beautifully dressed prince, whose face was twisted with a ferocious hatred as he turned to angrily push his way out through this dense crowd. Two burly and hard looking warriors followed in his wake, both wearing the long, sky-blue cavalry cloaks of the Epidiau.

All attention was brought back to the blackened clearing, now emptied of the celebrating royal families by a blast on a druid's horn. HênDdu stood grimly in front of his altar and in the dead-centre of this circular, spiritual porthole of black and sullied grass. His three, supporting arch-druids took

their positions behind him for the most vital and final part of this historic assembly. The deer horn warbled once more, and this crowd fell silent.

“Now draw near all who consider themselves honourable Prydeinig, and all who have an abiding love for our sacred islands of Prydein!” HênDdu called out, his strange voice somehow carrying to every corner of this huge plain, and these people closed in with the tension mounting in them all as the ultimate ritual drew near. The arch-druid Einion turned and lifted Belenos Hên’s sacred and ancient, spirit wreathed sword *Caled-sol* reverentially from the blood splashed altar and passed it with a curt bow to his master. HênDdu’s face became animated as he took this deeply sacred and iconic sword and turning back to the crowd with it outstretched before him, he presented the most revered blade in all Prydein’s long history with a savage pride. The sun sculpted and utterly beautiful bronze scabbard had been polished until it shone like old gold, and the druid held it out in front of him in his left hand. The fingers of his right fastened around the sharkskin grip of the sun adorned pommel, and he raised ‘Hard-sunlight’ to the heavens.

“Now draw near all our honoured and much worshipped deities, who so also love these scared islands of Prydein to witness our great Datganiad Gwladol!” He called loudly, before turning and presenting this sacred, legendary sword to all four corners of the world and to all who watched with bated breath. HênDdu then slowly part-drew the polished steel blade of *Caled-sol* before lifting his noble head, and his tonsured brow glistened in the torchlight, but it was utterly outshone by the vital gleam from just the first six, glittering inches of honed steel there revealed.

“Y gwir yn erbyn y byd, a oes heddwch neu rhyfel?” HênDdu asked them loudly with a scowl, and his challenge boomed over the multitude of heads and shining eyes gazing back at him. ‘The truth against the world, is it peace or war?’ he demanded to know, and the response was like a clap of thunder.

“RHYFEL!”

Birds squawked and flapped away in fright, and the dogs of the distant tref could be heard barking and howling at this thunderous sound, which seemed to vibrate in the air for long moments. The brif-druid stalked around his altar now in his bare and blackened feet, clearly energised by this first declaration of war, and he paced this scorched saucer of earth holding up the great part-drawn sword. His chaotic eyes blazed with a ferocious challenge now, and the front circle backed away in fear as he withdrew another twelve inches of etched and polished steel, and hard shards of torchlight bounced off Caled-sol in alarm and in all directions.

“Calon wrth galon, a oes heddwch neu rhyfel?” ‘Heart to heart, is there peace or war?’ He challenged them again now, his tremulous but uncannily powerful voice carrying to even the outer fringes of this vast gathering. The people shook the earth again with their sacred oath:

“RHYFEL!”

HênDdu smiled then, horribly and in a kind of spirit-gripped rictus. His voice deepened, and it grew ominously as it lashed across the heads of these people whilst the dogs continued their barking and their eerie howling from the distant tref.

“Gwaedd uwch adwaedd, a oes heddwch neu rhyfel?” He demanded of them lastly with a wild look in his sparking eyes now, and with spittle flying from his twisted mouth. ‘Shout above responding shout, is there peace or war?’ He demanded they complete the rite, and the very air shook with the inviolate declaration of war, as thousands of voices screamed as one: “RHYFEL!”

The druid came back around to the front of his altar now, and HênDdu’s face was a mask of fierce, blazing outrage as he fully withdrew Caled-sol, the fabulous blade of Belenos Hên which had claimed the mighty head of Bran himself five centuries ago. He held it aloft, so that the torchlight flashed off its full, glorious length and illuminated the wondrous chasing with pure golden swirls which ran the length of this stunning, priceless

blade. All the wide eyes around this circle were compulsively drawn to its stark and terrible beauty, held high in this animated prime druid's grip.

"Ia! Oes Rhyfel!" HênDdu confirmed loudly, and war was thus declared on Rome. The bedlam that ensued was a religious and superstitious explosion of Brythonic emotions. The ground shook as these newly allied, triadic warriors of northern Prydein hysterically screamed their warcries, drowning all other sounds, even the terrified howling of the dogs.

The drums began to pound a frenetic beat again. The horns bellowed and the Brythons danced their dance of death and sang their songs of glorious battle, as these three northern kingdoms together, finally united in a sacred triad for the first time ever were going to war.



Chapter Thirteen.

The tavern stank of stale beer, piss and the vinegar reek of rancid wine, all of which competed gamely with the sour odour of old sweat which permeated this hot and filthy, straw strewn alcove. Agapitus scowled as he took another swig of the warm, watery beer and he spat some of it onto the dirty straw at his feet.

“Fucking Gaulish shit!” He cursed, wiping his lips. “At least the hairy-arsed Germans knew how to brew a decent beer.” He added morosely, and the men around him nodded from their own personal experience.

“You used to get decent wine around here until.....well, until we drank it all!” Sisera, Agapitus’ Decanus declared, and the four other men around them laughed at this undeniable truth. The laughter soon died in this oppressive afternoon heat, and this group of close battle brothers returned to their lugubrious mood, their heads drooping again.

“Please tell us our noble Optio, why the fuck we are wasting our time and fortunes in building and seeking ships here in stinking Bononia, and then to venture across that treacherous channel to Prittania of all places?” Ælianus asked Agapitus for the third time today, and the Optio just spat on the straw again and shook his head.

Sisera belched loudly then and called the tavern porter to bring more ale.

“Prittania! The goat’s arse of the fucking world!” Carpus grumbled into his beer and from across this rough table.

“How would you know?” Sisera scoffed. “Have you been there?”

“No and neither have you. Nobody has, and I bet there’s a bloody good reason for it!” Carpus replied without raising his head, such was his enthusiasm for the planned crossing.

“Caesar’s been summoned back to Rome by Cato Minor and many other senior senators, as his mistakes and his burgeoning debts await him there impatiently.” Didacus offered in his cultured drawl, sitting on the end of the table and looking down his nose at them, as was his way. “He is in my humble opinion throwing the dice of Fortuna in a last-ditch gambit, as if he can claim successful contact, vassal promises and just a handful of hostages from Prittania, he will be the darling of Rome again and no one will be able to touch him.” This tall and rangy soldier told them knowingly. Whilst all here were well aware of their leader’s situation, Didacus enjoyed sharing his immense knowledge and fine intellect with his compatriots. “Our esteemed and illustrious senators, who feast so willingly on the hollow show of pageantry will fall at his feet should he make land on Prittania regardless of merit or reward, as the garish façade of comedy and tragedy were ever their bread and olives.” He finished sagely, looking quite pleased with himself at the form of his discourse.

“Why don’t you say it a bit louder Didacus you halfwit so we can all get a fucking castigatio!” Agapitus snarled, making his subordinate blush and look around this busy tavern carefully.

“I meant no insult to the great and noble senators my brave Optio!” Didacus interjected quickly, his eyes large but his innocence palpably false. “Noble Caesar thinks the island wealthy in slaves, gold, pearls and tin, but he also knows that Prittania holds a mystery that all Rome has wondered at for many generations. The challenge of taking control of even the smallest part of that enigmatic and unknown land, laying as it does over the very edge of the known world is immense!” He admitted sombrely and more quietly, looking around at his comrades. “Any general who could even reach Prittania with an army would win undying fame from those scound....senators!” He corrected himself with a smirk, and content his pearls of wisdom had been well cast, he resumed the minute inspection of his fingernails.

“Your wide knowledge and your even wider mouth, in tandem, will one day get you nailed to a wooden cross Didacus my clever friend.” *Miles*

Gregarius Gabinus growled from across the rough timbers of this stained and littered table. Didacus did not even look up to his regular enlisted comrade, but he smirked at the comment.

"It's already six days past the Kalend of Quintillus, and here we all are, still scratching around in the sand to find or build the cursed ships that will drown us all!" Carpus moaned from Didacus' side as his terror of the sea was well-known to them all. "I mean what will we gain from such a risky venture? For all we know Prittania is a bog-ridden boil on the arse of the world, and even if there is gold and pearls and all those other fucking things there, they're not going to be all piled up for us on the shore ready to shovel into our boats, and then what, we just fuck off again and all home for supper?" He pressed, and all eyes were on him now as none of these men had ever heard him speak so many words before in one go. "I'm all for fucking off home with what we already have." Carpus admitted then, absently picking at a bit of stuck gristle in his teeth with a filthy fingernail and farting loudly.

"Yes you would say that Carpus, you've still got every single fucking Denari you've ever earned!" Ferox chortled next to him, waving the soldier's foul emission from his face and making his friends laugh. "His coins bear the head of Romulus!" He added to more laughter, elbowing Carpus rudely, but the huge, bear fisted soldier just glowered at him as the others laughed at his clearly uncommon expense.

"As old as that joke then Ferox?" Didacus put in laconically with a raised eyebrow.

"I'm careful with my coin." Carpus mumbled, shrugging his bulbous shoulders, and taking a studied slurp of the poor ale as the laughing increased in this alcove around him.

"Careful?" Sisera blurted out in surprise, spilling his beer. "Fuck me, that's the understatement of the year! I can't remember when you last bought anything!" He added. "Especially wine or beer!"

“With respect my fine Decanus, can you too please fuck off!” Carpus asked him with a straight face.

“As I’ve already told you!” Didacus interrupted them before they got going again. “Great Caesar only needs the promise of those treasures and a few slaves and hostages, and Fortuna will smile on him again. Not that I expected you to take any of my wisdom in Carpus!” Didacus added dismissively, crossing his hairy legs to examine the hobs on the sole of one of his caligae.

“Eat my shit and die choking, you lanky streak of piss.” Carpus growled easily, draining his beer, but Didacus was not biting and ignored him.

“Hey, knock it off now, here’s Lemanus and I bet he’s looking for us!” Agapitus warned them, and they sat more upright as the Optio Principalis of their Cohort bent under the low and blackened thatch to stand looking around this dark and smoky tavern.

The plates of his polished armour gleamed against the blood red of his cloak and pierced the gloom of this shabby building with the stunning glory of Rome. The Senior Optio’s crested helmet, carried loosely under one arm declared his rank, and Lemanus looked ferocious. The man’s battle scarred, and granite face affirmed his veteran status and shouted his overt capabilities at all who would dare look upon him. The few grubby and woollen clad, long-haired locals gathered around the barrel-table in a dark corner muttered under their drooping moustaches, but none turned to look, as all feared the sudden and thoughtless cruelty of these Romans when slighted or challenged in any way.

“Lemanus!” Agapitus called out, his arm held up in greeting, and the short and stocky Optio strode across the filthy floor of this untidy thatched building and through its gloom to join them by a window opening which although let light into this tavern, it did nothing for the oppressive heat as there was not a breath of wind outside. Agapitus summoned the tavern porter again as the swarthy veteran stepped up to this alcove and nodded to the company before taking a seat opposite his subordinate.

“Domitus is on a fucking rampage again!” He muttered, thumping his helmet on the table and mopping sweat from his face with a faded linen rag.

The many eyes around him looked up to the heavens as all knew the particular and fastidious ways of their senior tribune, one Gnaeus Domitus Calvinus; Tribunus Laticlavus and 2nd in Command of their legion; Legio VII. Senior Tribune Domitus was considered by the enlisted men as a rash officer and a real soldier killer, one whom every *miles gregarius* in these legions feared above all others. The legionaries, the foot soldiers, these guards and engineers, the carpenters and armourers, the cooks and latrine diggers and all the other trades and duties of the regular soldier which kept this modern army rolling along, these were the indomitable *miles gregarii* of the legendary Roman army. These were hard, professional men who considered themselves the finest modern soldiers in this world, but martyrs they were not. Domitus had never been shy in sending these men to their deaths by the hundred, and that elitist, eternally aloof Patrician officer was hated and feared in equal measure by his enlisted subordinates. Agapitus knew the type. He had been unfortunate to serve under a few careless officers in his time, but Domitus was one of the worst and thought himself superior to any and all. That self-obsessed Patrician was an inveterate snob, and he tended to regard his social superiors as his intellectual inferiors in some way, whilst treating his intellectual equals as somehow socially lacking. All his lofty, acerbic rhetoric was always put forward in a highly affected manner and it had made him many enemies, but in his own mind it seems nobody even came close. Agapitus shuddered at the thought of serving close to such a man, happy in the present company of these battle mates. He trusted these familiar and doughty warriors alongside him whom he lived with and had fought with, and together they had learned how to march for miles on end across this world. They had come to rely completely on their own resources and on each other for weeks at a time. For many years they had made a proper, regulation camp each night together as all Roman soldiers did, with eight fighting men to a unit and the Decanus in charge. Each

man carried tools for digging, as well as two long stakes to erect a shelter for sleeping under. These stakes made up their marching packs when lashed perpendicular to each other, and the 'T' shaped carrying frame which they slung over their left shoulder when marching took some getting used to, especially for the probatios and tirones. These recruits squirmed under their *furcas*; this unforgiving timber carrying frame for weeks, until they hardened to the task and learned to put a folded scrap of cloth under the beam. On long marches the best Optios would call out '*vicis*' occasionally and they would gratefully shift the weight to the opposite shoulders. The *furca*; this 'cross of burden' was a constant companion, with its voluminous and tubular leather cloak bag laying along the crossbar and surmounted by each soldier's bedroll, both of which were securely strapped down. These were their marching packs, to which were secured or suspended many crucial items along with a cooking pot and a frying pan. They were simply invaluable, and many carried a leather pouch under their *Furca* for more personal items. Along with the weapons and armour each wore and carried, the legionary would also have to haul along enough rations for anything from three days to sixteen, depending on the territory and the campaign at hand. Add to this also by necessity spare clothing and any personal possessions and the weight of a soldier's equipment would often amount to well over eighty pounds. Weighed down by such burdens, it is little wonder these indefatigable warriors have been nicknamed *Marius' mules*, but the *miles gregarii* of this Roman army had carried their marching packs for uncountable miles in their conquest of Gaul and elsewhere in this world, leaving in their bloody wake vassal territories now labouring under the heavy yoke of Roman republican rule. These ordinary foot soldiers of Caesar's army who were once called *Pedites* in their long history had by the necessity of campaigning become 'Jacks of all trades' and were also the backbone of this same army. These five enlisted men gathered around their two optios in this Gaulish tavern represented the engine of one of these two Legions assembled by Julius Caesar, each representing five and a half thousand men. The basic units of these legions were the centuries of eighty men led by a centurion, with

an optio in support and acting as second in command. These centuries were divided into eight-man sections which shared these goatskin tents whilst on campaign or a room in their barracks. Six centuries made up a cohort and so ten cohorts made a full Legion, with the prime, 1st cohort being double in size. Each Legion was also accompanied by a mounted force of equites of one hundred and twenty men, divided into four squadrons.

Domitus, the 7th Legion's second in command and the officer who was so blasé with the lives of his soldiers was one of Caesar's favourites, but a man loathed by the enlisted men; these valiant miles gregarii.

"What's got up his arse now?" Agapitus asked Lemanus, a sardonic twist to his lips.

"He thinks someone stole his last amphora of Falernian, and he's having an apoplectic fucking fit!" Lemanus spat, reaching for the first log of beer on the tray the porter offered.

He drank this large log of ale in a series of loud and mechanical gulps, as two rivulets of the weak beer ran from the corners of his mouth and down his unshaven jowls. Banging the empty mug to the tabletop, Optio Principalis Lemanus belched like a camel to the amusement of all these soldiers.

This section had spent the morning sweating under the shouted instructions of Caesar's master shipbuilder and his naval captains, and these soldiers had bent their backs to huge oaken beams and spars, hauling them across the soft and energy sapping sands to each ship's carcass. These enormous ships lined the nearby sandy beach, and each one was in an advanced but different state of completion. Nearby Traîth Gwin had made an ideal location to build or convert shipping, and nine great timber hulls were still trapped between their wedges on the soft white sand less than half a mile away. Out in the dubious shelter of that small and shallow bay were moored the eleven completed cavalry

transport ships, which had been forced back here only recently from Port Bonon due to its congestion.

Quintus Cassius Longinus, the Quaestor of Legio X and the commander of these potential twenty-five ships of the cavalry had left the shoreside *Fabrum* an hour earlier, but Marcus Vitruvius Mamurra remained. Known just as *Mamurra* by his fellow officers and throughout the roman Army, this much-feared officer never missed a trick. His experienced eyes seemed to be everywhere at once, and that dour and stocky man was the *Praefectus Fabrum*, the officer in charge of the shipbuilding for Caesar's planned invasion. Under his painfully strict supervision, those enormous vessels had already been converted and weaponised by his engineering *immunes*; the expert metal and wood workers of his soldiers and sailors. Those huge ships were recently acquired Môrini craft in the main, bolstered by captured Veneti vessels and assembled at Traîth Gwin to carry men, equipment and horses across the grey waters of the channel facing them. Caesar had demanded twenty-five large ships for the cavalry of his Legio X, and his men had bought, bartered and even requisitioned ships from the two largest local tribes. They had raided other, smaller coastal Gaulish tribes in this endeavour, up and down this rugged coastline for many miles in both directions. The pressure on the boat builders and their engineers had been mounting steadily for them to complete the nine remaining horse and troop carriers before the month of Quintillus was out and the weather began to worsen. Five of these transports were to be launched tomorrow and then trimmed and finished, adding to the eleven cavalry ships already in Caesar's service. Just a few hundred yards from this ramshackle tavern, the long and dusty road outside and which divides this village peters out where the white beach of Traîth Gwin begins. That long, curving beach is backed by wooded cliffs of competing white chalk, carved into a sharp 'V' by the river Herlen over the millennia and which finds the sea there. That broad estuary and its sandy beach lies between the tiny town of Duru Amblet and this seaside village of Duru Gwîn, and the Romans had called the small nearby beachside harbour their *Portus Ulterior*. This filthy and rundown tavern which offered

its dubious hospitality to these resting men lay off the main street of the little thatched village of Duru Gwîn belonging to the Menapi tribe of this coastal region. It wound its way to Duru Amblet up the coast, and it was less than half a mile from the beach where the auxiliary forces of their 3rd Cohort were assisting the 2nd with the rushed assembly of the last of those monstrous ships. The majority of Caesar's fleet was secured over the open western border with the Môrini and in their biggest harbour of Porth Bonon, ten miles down this coast, and which their conquering general had renamed *Portus Itius*. That huge port was absolutely full of shipping, making any toing and froing a fraught affair at best. Due to this constriction, the eleven completed transports of the cavalry were being held here at the navy's Fabrum harbour of Portus Ulterior. Work had increased apace this week to complete the fourteen ships still on the beach, and as the weather had slowly deteriorated week by week, these men were worked hard. Nine of their ships were propped well above the waterline and in various stages of construction, whilst the five to be floated on tomorrow's tide were tethered closer to the surf, but all were constantly swarmed by an army of sweat drenched engineers and sailors.

"Again!" Lemanus barked at the porter, who remained impassive but turned quickly to his duties. Agapitus handed Lemanus his own brimming log of beer and the senior optio swallowed half of that too before he sighed and relaxed, nodding his thanks. "By Vulcan's arse I needed that, it's hotter than Hades out there!" He breathed, wiping his speckled brow again with the rag.

"Mm, no wind all day. Feels like a storm's brewing." Didacus nodded glumly from across the table, thoughtlessly swirling the stale beer around in his log.

"Ay, back at camp!" Agapitus chortled. "So has somebody really made off with the good Tribune's vintage vinum?" Agaptius asked his senior NCO this with a smirk.

"Maybe he drank it himself and forgot, but I'll wager it was that Bacchanalian reprobate Adrastus, but if he's caught, Domitus will have

the meat flogged from his ribs for it regardless of his past exploits.” Lemanus stated the obvious. “Anyway, it’s all back to camp lads and smartly, as there’s a major inspection before ‘prima vigilia’ tomorrow morning and somebody’s going to get flogged, mark my words.” This rugged optio told them evenly, his hard eyes showing no emotion whatsoever and mirroring all those around him, as all knew the high price demanded for careless mistakes in this man’s army.

“Where’s the rest of our century now Agapitus?” The veteran senior optio queried as this group of soldiers prepared themselves to leave the tavern, grabbing their helmets and their furcas.

“Our recruitment efforts have emptied these lands of any *suitable* candidates.” Agapitus replied pragmatically, stealing a scornful glance at the huddle of surly locals in the corner. “So Optio Eolus has his section foraging for food in the forest to the east for our cohort, and Tycho has his two assisting Centurion Verus in his search for suitable shipping to the south. As to the rest, who knows!”

Lemanus nodded at each point made by Agapitus as they walked, leading their men out of this dark and ramshackle tavern, under the filthy thatch and to the dusty street outside where the remainder of their troop had gathered to await them. These rested men all squinted against the heat and the bright afternoon sunlight which assaulted them, but they shouldered their furcas and fell into their marching formation without a word spoken. The two optios took the van and donned their bright and crested helmets, causing hot lances of sunlight to bounce off their polished, curved surfaces in all directions. Optio Principalis Lemanus on the right, called out; “Para-ti!” and the men stiffened, preparing to march. He made a brief signal with his right hand then, calling out; “Procedi-te!” and they all moved off together in step. These two veteran optios of five Gaulish battles who were leading them were the spiritual leaders of these men, and they led them away up this hot and dusty, north-western drover’s lane at an easy pace. This sandy lane snaked uphill toward their fort, shimmering in a heat-haze on the distant ridge ahead. Both these

officers were iron hard men who had marched and had fought their way across Gaul following their great and legendary general, and they would march back across it if ordered to do so, as Caesar had that extra ingredient that few military leaders had in abundance; luck. The Goddess Fortuna seemed to hold their General Caesar in her eye. Inevitably, his ambition had become nothing less than breathtaking, so these two optios and their men would follow him to the very doors of Hades itself if he chose to pay them a visit. These were strong and enduring, trusted and valued men who had been forged close in the furnace of battle, and in some ways far closer than any family ever could. These tough, iron-willed and professional soldiers were Caesar's battle tested weapon of choice, and it showed, in the way they held their heads high and in the proud manner in which they marched.

A local goatherder materialised in the heat haze ahead, and he came down this lane toward them shepherding his small and scrawny herd, the crotal bells strung around the necks of the leading goats '*donging*' softly as they wandered downhill in this hot dust. He was clearly a worn out, local old herdsman and he was bent over with the weight of those same many years of endless work. He shuffled downhill with a painful looking gait of his own making and leaning heavily on an equally crooked and ancient looking staff. This old shepherd flicked his crook at a straying nanny to get her out of these soldiers' way and off the road, back among the dozen or so hungry looking goats which preceded him in the shallow ditch alongside this lane. This bent and withered ancient retreated into the deep hood of his woollen cape, keeping his eyes lowered as these dangerous, glimmering foreign warriors tramped past him, ignoring him and kicking up a cloud of sandy, seaside dust behind them.

This gnarled old goatherder straightened somewhat when they had passed, and he turned to watch as those Roman foreigners began to vaporise from the ground up and vanish into the shimmering heat haze emanating from this hill. As he stood watching them depart in this dusty heat, he revealed a more imposing stature for the first time. The hooded

warrior stood upright, spitting into the dusty wake of his sworn enemy, and a pair of vital blue eyes glittered with hatred from the shadows of the wool. That Roman troop had seen what their eyes had shown them as they marched proudly past; a twisted and bedraggled old goatherder, completely missing the hard and unwrinkled face hidden in the hood's shadows. They missed too the briefest flash of a toothy blue tattoo, hidden now by a knotted scarf at this visiting man's powerful throat.

* * * * *

It became apparent, that cautioned perhaps by trading merchants associated with Rome's shortly impending invasion, the barbarian kings of Pritania had sent without delay an ambassadorial delegation. One Lord Androgeus, along with a chosen group of his best diplomats had been despatched to Gaul and had arrived at Caesar's camp in Bononia in the early afternoon with an urgent desire to address the general. Following an awkward three-hour wait, this Androgeus and his blue gowned retinue of envoys were ushered under guard by two magnificent and imperious primus pilli centurions into the large headquarters tent at the centre of this enormous fortress. These glittering centurions brought the ambassadorial delegation before their general, and where the apparently famous Prittanian ambassador Androgeus was formally introduced to Caesar, whereupon this man in a long, pleated blue gown bowed deeply and with much respect to the general and all his attendant officers. His demeanour and his calm authority spoke volumes about his courage, as almost all Caesar's previous petitioning foreign emissaries, ambassadors and hostages had not survived to return with any response. In fact, the disappearing act of the normally protected representatives of his enemies had become in itself known, as 'Caesar's Response'.

Despite being well aware of Androgeus' royal lineage, Caesar refused to nod or bow in return or even to stand in greeting to the man, giving him just the open and brusque hand of invitation to speak from his seat. Androgeus' professionalism was so great he did not even blink at this grave insult. He remained expressionless and stood upright to deliver his

many-authored and much revised speech in a perfect and cultured Latin. Many here had expected the torn clothes and ash filled hair like the prostrated supplications of the long-haired Gauls, but far from offering the platitudes and entreaties expected by all here, this lordly ambassador had come to warn the general against his imminent folly. With great courage, this tall and imperious looking man declared that he had brought with him the oath sworn promises of the five great kings of Prittain, stating that they had come together as one nation for the first time in their long history and were prepared to offer him the most violent expulsion from their sacred isles should he be foolish enough to come in arms. This pompous barbarian noble went on to advise Caesar that his whole country was allied in the stout and resolute defence of their realms, and Caesar's eyes hardened at these threatening warnings as he too had been hoping for entreaties of peace and offers of treasure. He kept his silence as this tall barbarian posing as a refined lord continued eloquently, informing him of their sacred and inviolate blood oaths. This arrogant ambassador boldly told Caesar and in no uncertain terms that there would be no gold, he would have no hostages, and not one inch of sacred ground would be given him by them, as their holy and priest led, national alliance had been made and sealed in the royal blood of those same five great kings and before all their Gods. Androgeus went on to give Caesar lurid descriptions of the overwhelming and bizarre forces which awaited him, from spirit-warriors and 'flaming crowns' to gigantic dogs, and yet none of this seemed to impress the erudite general, but he listened in bleak silence, nonetheless. Those of his senior staff who knew him best could see that their general was annoyed with this man as his neck coloured darkly when his anger was fired, but they followed his lead and remained still, silent and aloof. In view of the hubris shown by this pompous barbarian, Caesar decided that he would give this man no answer, nor would he give him one word in response. This he would do to mar his great personal achievement and to demean him utterly, as without an *official* response his duty-bound mission would remain unfinished, forever. Inwardly, Caesar had seriously considered having this barbarous, arrogant lout and his

studious, puny looking cronies executed where they stood and to Hades with the consequences, but he quickly quashed the impulse, as he was privately worried and unsure of the unknown element to these Prittanic savages and what really awaited him there. The Gaulish tribes he had conquered had varied greatly, and some had been far more willing to capitulate than others, but the more ferocious clans such as the Nervii had offered a much stiffer resistance. The wild and rebellious Nervii among a few other dominant tribes in Gaul had ruled by warfare and by taxing their dependent but vassal tribes whilst adhering to a heroic, hoplitic tradition themselves, riven with ritual and superstition. These vassal tribes would over time become more pastoral and peaceful, leaving the martial imperatives to their ruling tribes, and whilst these Gaulish conventions were something Caesar exploited as often as he could, no one knew for sure how the Prittans operated despite their outward similarities. It was the same thing which always unnerved him; the unknown. And so, with such a long and growing list of unknowns in this questionable gamble of his already, he steeled himself to show no reaction to the impertinent and overt challenge brought here by this tall and pompous heathen regardless of his claim to royal blood. There was too this same complication, and incredibly, this same man could soon become the king of one of the very tribes which in secret had offered him vassal alliance, and so he could not alienate the man too much as he may prove useful to him in the future. Caesar had listened to all his statement, laconically glancing at the scribes occasionally to make sure they were recording all of it, but secretly his blood boiled, and he decided to have all record of this council expunged. Torn between his desire to remain silent in insult and the burning urge to scream at this ridiculous man, he gripped the arms of his throne like chair as his knuckles paled, and his throat darkened. As his anger grew, he wanted to strike the fool and shout at him, that he had no idea of the remarkable power he was addressing and just who he represented. 'Dogs! Spirit warriors and flaming crowns?' Did he not know that he faced the general and the army which had just conquered all Gaul with infantry, engineers, artillery and squadrons of the best cavalry in the world?'

Once it was clear this pompous barbarian had said all that he had come to say, Caesar just nodded to let the man know he had heard and understood every insolent word he had spoken in his stupid singing voice and in his fine and tutored Latin, even though it had irked him. The man's fearless poise had also annoyed him, as had the insolent way in which he met his gaze as though they were equals. Despite his earlier misgivings and reasoning, Caesar's repulsion of this actor and his meaningless, mumbled script had soured his stomach and spoiled his mood. Looking at this tall pretender now with an unconcealed contempt, he abruptly signalled his centurions with a dismissive flick of his fingers, that their time in his presence was over and that he desired them gone. These two armed and armoured soldiers moved in quickly and menacingly, and the eyes of these intellectual visitors flew open in alarm, fearing 'Caesar's Response' and the dreaded murder which had surely stalked their dreams these last few nights. Only Androgeus remained impassive, upright and regal still as these centurions approached with the most murderous expressions, hands gripping their swords. They came to a halt swiftly in front of Androgeus and both men suddenly produced empty hands to show them the way out, but each grinned wolfishly at the terror on the stricken faces of these diplomats and at their crass joke. Androgeus just coolly bowed to these two grinning soldiers and turned on his heel.

Caesar could not contain himself, and he fell about his huge chair, hooting with laughter and slapping his leg at the terror of the barbarian diplomats, a mocking laughter that was taken up by all the Romans in this pavilion. Flanked by the two brutally grimacing soldiers, the imperious Crown Prince Avarway of Trinovanta and Lord Androgeus, Chief Ambassador to the Pritans showed his true worth. Although haggard from the exhaustion of his weeks of travelling and the stress of this particular mission, his proud lineage and his iron bound character came to the fore, as in the face of this assault on his honour and that of his colleagues, Androgeus did not even flinch. Ramrod straight and wearing an inscrutable expression, he led his still terrified retinue of diplomats toward the open leather flaps of this gigantic tent and with his head held high. The

emissaries of Prittan filed out into the night behind him on the duckboards underfoot, followed by verbal abuse, ribald comments and derisive laughter every step of the way.

Eight of Caesar's rude and insulting soldiers closely escorted this dismissed Prittanic delegation on the road west, as a unit and behind the two dazzling officers with their magnificent helmets. This raucous Roman guard barged thoughtlessly through a bedraggled looking herd of goats which leapt away in fear, as did their ancient owner. Without a glance his way, this garrulous Roman escort marched these Prittanic visitors down their arrow-straight road and toward the flickering lights of their distant harbour, verbally abusing them at every opportunity. At Portus Itius, they ensured they returned immediately to their puny ship tied up at the wharves, and then with many rude gestures, they stood to witness them as they left these waters forthwith.

In Caesar's camp the following day, tense feelings of expectation had been building amongst these thousands of men throughout the daylight hours. Now, on this penultimate night and as dusk approached, a spiritual tension was added to this complex mix of emotions running through Fortress Bonon. They had been drawn out of their tents by the strident call of assembly, and now all the regimented pairs of eyes in this fort were watching the sedate, garlanded flock of priests and animals process sunwise around their perimeter *Via Sagularis*. Thousands watched this circular, sunwise procession, until it had made one complete circuit and approached the main gate once more from where they had entered. The priest at the head of this column of man and animal turned right now, to head solemnly up the *Via Praetoria* and toward the tented pavilions of their general's headquarters in the centre of this camp, whose entrance flaps were wide open and tied back.

Before the sheltered and seated nobles and their attendant officers in this huge and airy pavilion was set out a colourful sacrificial altar, and behind this sacred edifice stood the *aquilifers* of each Legion, standing to *intente* with their shoulders thrown back and holding their revered banners aloft.

The eagle standard of a legion is called an Aquila and it is the very symbol of their legion's honour, being a treasure that must be protected at all costs. The aquilifers, who were the veterans tasked to carry these standards in war and ceremony alike were known as 'principales'. They were almost as highly ranked as centurions, and these men were invariably excellent fighters who would defend their eagles with their lives. This trusted, honourable and much-envied position of aquilifer drew double pay, and due to the proven honesty of these soldiers, their positions also made them the enlisted men's treasurers, putting them in charge of their pay chests and making them the keepers of these men's wax tablet accounts. These two experts had seen every ceremony known to Roman man in their time in this army, and they looked on emotionlessly as these familiar events now played out before them once more here in Bononia.

The three Roman priests used their ancient and esoteric knowledge to call down their panoply of Gods and Goddesses to witness and to hear their prayers and honest sacrifices, to purify and protect all within these walls and to ensure the success of their impending invasion. Their dedicated altar was garlanded brightly too, and it bore several bronze and silver dishes with offerings of food and wine to the assembled divinities. The head priest sacrificed a ram first, which kicked and bleated its life away and which was followed swiftly by a large boar, who by necessity had its powerful legs tethered, as they were dangerous animals if not killed cleanly. Lastly, a huge black bull was led to the altar and there too had its throat cut to make the final sacrifice amid the impassioned pleas of the priests, who were now covered in steaming gore. Many scarred and seasoned veterans present sent their own secret prayers to Mithras; their chosen God of war at the moment the bull fell to its knees. It died without a sound, and its steaming, frothing blood gushed to the earth, splashing loudly. This sacred and bloody ritual made a deep impression on the new recruits, but even the veterans were moved by this ceremony on their behalf. Many un-blooded miles gregarii and small knots of awestruck tirones had stood staring long moments after the stand down was blown

whilst their longer served compatriots had made their easy way off the praetorium, exalted now and heading to their sleeping lines for the night with the blessings of their Gods a comfort, lifting their mood.

A little later and when the night had almost embraced the dark and nearby shoreline, the final and gore dipped rays of a low sun cast their deeply lurid glow across its pebbles. They created a billion shadows to hide among them and made the foaming surf at water's edge look like bloodstained lace upon it. A mounted delegation in fine Belgic dress had taken an oblique and covert route from the nearby port following their unannounced landing. They rode noisily across these pebbles now, disturbing the tiny but myriad, huddled shadows around them and then charged off this beach through the barrier of tall dunes. They crossed the adjacent main road with a clatter and which they had avoided thus far, taking the inland lane which now snaked its way uphill to the Roman Fort from the junction ahead and on, up and over the low hill above it. This well-dressed party of around a dozen riders soon turned off this steep by road to arrive at the fort, passing through the dark eastern gate to Caesar's camp, and these Belgic emissaries spent more than two hours with the general in his private pavilions.

This group of riders left the fortress in bold starlight but with an additional rider in their company, and with a heavily burdened packhorse now bringing up the rear. This now 'royal' Belgic group of hooded riders cantered back down the hill and headed for the deeply shadowed foreshore again leading back to Porth Bonon and their awaiting ship, dodging the main road completely once more. Clattering back down across the wide drover's road, this group of expensively dressed Belgic nobles and their guards headed back through the dunes and pounded down to the beach. As they crunched across these noisy pebbles, they scattered an emaciated looking herd of goats approaching, causing their bent old herder to wave his crooked staff at them in anger. They thundered past him from the bristling dunes and headed west along this

dark beach, back to their ship, and none of them gave him a backward glance.

As this ingenious man straightened to his full height and watched them gallop for the distant port, with a grimace and a blue snarl he spat his disgust to these pebbles.



Chapter Fourteen.

The central courtyard of Caswallawn's huge fortress was packed with wealthy looking and regal warriors, and the display of their clothing and accoutrements were dazzling to the eye. The five great kings present along with their princes and gŵyrd represented thirty-three ancient and sacred Houses of Prydein; a holy assembly never before achieved, and it seemed as though the whole world had gathered here in Casufelawny today. The frisson of exciting power this generated coursed through every person present, as each knew too that the Gods must surely be watching. The druids confirmed the Gods' presence in shifts, and different conclaves of these priests would hold their arms wide and perpetuate this litany of devotion and prayer so that their worship was continuous. The sixteen honourable Houses of the 'northern triad' under their main battle banners of the stag, the boar and the eagle had finally arrived at their southern destination to make their alliance with the twelve noble Houses of the Brythonau Dde. They would do it here in CaerGwlyb and under Caswallawn's lynx banners along with the five valiant Houses of the Khumry, who had marched here behind the sons of Beli Mawr himself. These world renowned, elite warriors had marched east and south-east under the fearsome banners of the flaming war hammer of their Gorddofican leadership and the dreaded red dragon flags of their soldiery. These were the infamous Essyllwyr, and these ultimate warlords of fame and bri, who paused for no power on this earth completed this host and made the magical numbers of power so loved by the priesthood and all Prydein's Gods. Thirty-three noble Houses; joined together for the first time in history, and Fro Cyma was overflowing with the uncountable yet subordinate warriors of these once disparate and unfamiliar tribes. The flickering campfires could be seen for miles around and in every direction, competing with the myriad stars above.

The huge northern triad had travelled the two hundred miles south from Bellnor's CaerUswr, and the forward elements of this vast army had left Coritana in southern Breged and had crossed the borderlands into Casufelawny and Lloegr last night. The host had rested at DunBorthmyn, Casufelawny's most northerly fortress and market town, rising early and journeying the final thirty-odd miles to this huge plain today, the rear echelons arriving well into the afternoon. The ox-drawn baggage carts and the spare horses were still arriving over four hours later and as the light began to fade, here in Lloegr; the ancient *land of moonlight*. It seemed as if all Prydein had been swept into this inexorable whirlpool of humanity and deposited in Caswallawn's territory, and they kept coming until the land could scarce contain them. The five great monarchs of this enormous gathering had made their pact and had sworn their oaths on this ground barely an hour past, and Ederus, Cridas, Bellnor, Lludd and Caswallawn had all clasped their hands together in allied martial unity. The roar of their nobles and chieftains had swelled and had carried over the sharp battlements of this enormous inner caer, galvanising the surrounding soldiers inside the outer palisades, and even rousing the *werrin* of the adjoined tref into a mead-soaked carnival of their own. This primeval, glorious upsurge of emotion and sound was carried outwards, growing and swelling as it travelled, building like a thunderous tidal wave until the air reverberated with the enjoined battle cries of over fifty thousand Brythonic souls, joined too in arms for the first time in their long and glorious history. Here, in the beating heart of Lloegr even the fringes of the distant forests around this vast plain of long cleared ground twinkled with thousands of campfires as evening drew near. As dusk settled softly onto this ancient, noble land, a pensive and thoughtful atmosphere descended with it, quietening this unimaginable mass of brooding humanity into fitful sleep. This dark, vast and now silent encampment was only a day's march from the lands of the Caintau, who's southern, Gallic-facing shoreline will surely soon witness the arrival of the Wolf of Rome and his barbarous shock troops.

The following day passed into a glorious afternoon, and Caswallawn smiled indulgently as he looked around himself from the soft comfort of his chair, as he had spent much gold in these preparations and had anticipated this day keenly for many weeks. As he surveyed the remains of a lavish feast being finished off by the huge number of his noble guests and satisfied that the entertainment he had provided them had been well received, the king of the Southern Brythons and the most powerful man in all Lloegr was content. Finally, his vision was being rewarded and the once scorned vastness of this hugely expensive fortress was now showing its worth, and he was glad of it. He was glad too that the druids had taken themselves off to one of his large chambers, to perform some arcane rite no doubt and accompanied by much meaningless ceremony and endless, incomprehensible mumblings. He could never relax in the company of priests, especially their primary druid who still unnerved him to the root of his being even after so many years. From this high and private stone veranda protruding from the front of his keep, Caswallawn could look down over almost all his inner courtyard; a vast expanse of flat grassland which had cost him so much to have drained and turfed. The hubbub of constant noise that arose from the huge crowd upon it was loud, and confirmation enough in itself of his successes this day as all formalities and obligations had surely been addressed. These hundreds of noble Brythons now relaxed among themselves, making new friends and seeking out old ones, spreading out on the close-cropped acres of lush grass below him, and Caswallawn watched it all from his most comfortable chair. Galedon was ensconced around the foot of the northern battlements in their splendour, whilst the aristocracy of Breged surrounded the south-eastern corner tower next to the bridge over the cheerfully babbling and vital *inner* loop of the afon Fer, now in the cooling shade. Caswallawn had built a vast and sprawling bastion here and from three natural defensive formations; two converging rivers around one ancient shelf in the bedrock upon which was founded an old and decrepit hillfort. Using his ingenuity and following a thorough survey and evaluation of this old caer's surroundings by himself and his engineers, he

had come to realise that with a bit of vision and initiative and several buckets of gold, he could consolidate this huge natural stronghold and build something quite special and eminently defensible from it. He had begun with this ancient and stone built interior dun, surrounded as it was on three sides by its inner palisade and a deep, utterly overgrown moat known as the *Ffos*. Caswallawn had rebuilt and completely renovated this stone keep at the heart of this now sprawling fortress, hugely expanding its circumference across the whole of this hilltop. During this massive construction work, his civilian engineers discovered an extended network of ancient foundations under the turf they had cut away, revealing a once massive and clearly impressive complex which had obviously stood here long ages ago. In doing so, they had discovered that its foundations were truly ancient and that they were clearly massive. The monoliths of dark green granite used in the footings of this ancient palace could only have come from the Durotrygau tribe's granite quarries on the great south-western peninsula of this country. These incredibly heavy foundation stones would have needed to be shipped from their Ynys Bwl on the south coast all the way around the foot of Prydein on the Môr Udd and up the Tafwys estuary initially, and before then being hauled in some way overland to CaerGwlyb, and it was a mind-boggling feat of logistics and communication which Caswallawn doubted he could emulate even in these modern times. From this momentous undertaking alone, Caswallawn was sure this had been a Trojan stronghold and one of his bold ancestors' royal palaces, and so he had been determined from that delightful day of discovery to rebuild this once noble palace and restore it to what he guessed would be somewhere near its ancient and majestic beauty. The huge, supporting stones of this marvellous and new inner keep were just dark-green and crumbling teeth emerging from the crown of a low and overgrown hill and completely surrounded by marshes when he had first arrived here. All else had been reclaimed by nature over the intervening centuries on this old hill, and she had laid a soft green carpet of wild growth over the whole palace layout, but Caswallawn had his people clear the lot, right down to the original foundations. The outer caer

lay between the walls, nestling around a fork in the two rivers and was itself surrounded by the miles of outer palisade and fronted by a vast and steeply cut, connected triple ditch system. The seemingly endless palisade built atop the timber-propped berms, soaring above those deadly ditches encompassed this whole citadel fortress, and together they were formidable. The huge spread of now drained and turfed ground within the outer caer had been gravelly and patchy waste ground in those days. It had been peppered with faint circular shadows, etched into the dirt all across that huge parade ground and which even now showed themselves on the driest days of summer as yellow rings in the lush green of his new turf. These ghostly remains of ancient Trojan dwellings had never been rebuilt, as the new and adjoined town of Tref Gwlyb now housed the werrin of this extended community of resilient Casufel descendants. These old homesteads were deeply honoured still however, as these people had lived here since Brutus' arrival although in hugely reduced numbers, and these hardy people had endured. They had survived to flourish once more and to repopulate this once shining and royal citadel, but the old town of their forebears had become a military asset of Caswallawn's and his men's practice ground. The newest, north-eastern section of ditches adjacent to the *new* Tref Gwlyb, which is itself two centuries old had been renewed at a fearsome cost in both labour and materials. This huge but crucial part of the *levelling* ditch system around this inner keep on its hill, and which had consumed so much of his gold is named *Clawdd y Cythrael*. This devilishly deep and internally festooned, triple ditch system part circles this huge stronghold and is connected with the *Ffos* and the opposing *Clawdd y Ffawydd* ditches, located over half a mile away to the southwest. Together and as a linked system they look daunting, and now returned to their original and highly effective condition insurmountable perhaps, but Caswallawn knew as all builders knew that you cannot build a truly indefensible fortress, as there are always clever men who can devise something to counter even the most bewildering defensive structures.

'Wet Town' is perhaps an uncommon name, but *old* Tref Gwlyb was a very old settlement founded in a bow of the afon Lygan and delimited nearby by the very dissimilar afon Fer, and on a ground which had become water meadow and marshland since its abandonment, a clearly cataclysmic event which had happened so long ago nobody knew anything about it, not even their bards. Arglwydd Lygan is still prone to overflowing her boundaries here quite often, and so much of the surrounding land around the old hill of the fortress had to be drained by Caswallawn and his civil engineers, digging hundreds of gravel filled ditches across the outer compound all leading down to the two rivers, and it was when the ancient, long abandoned Trojan town had been discovered. Caswallawn had his men take great care not to cause too much damage as they laid down their gravel trenches, as the spirit dwellers of each abode still demanded their continued and undiminished respect. The choked and heavily overgrown, triple-ditch system had too been cleared and drained, which had been a monumental task itself. He recalled the whole denuded system had looked awesome and vast like a huge and dry, circular lagoon when it had been empty, before then being completely renovated and rebuilt with new and seasoned alder by his excellent builders, and which wood was the slowest of all woods to rot from water. The enormous, dry and deep ditch system once fully repaired had been festooned with sharpened stakes by Caswallawn's skilled armourers, also formed of seasoned, fire baked and tarred alder, staked to the earth in sections within those ditches and making them incredibly dangerous for the workers to negotiate, but the whole wickedly lethal structure had been finished finally and the gates opened, flooding the deadly canal and drastically lowering both rivers for many days as the system filled, finally concealing its rows of black and deadly teeth. All this furious and relentless activity had come at an eye watering cost to this ambitious monarch, and he also recalled standing in his virtually empty metal vault far below, aghast at the swingeing and ballooning costs which had emptied its stout shelves. However, CaerGwlyb's fantastic and gated ditch system allowed this whole meadow's water levels to be adjusted and

balanced by the three huge water gates once more, just as it had been designed to do almost five centuries previously when it had been installed by those marvellous, industrious Trojans of Brutus'. Countless fir trees had been felled in this fertile region around CaerGwlyb by Caswallawn's men and women to erect the seemingly endless dual palisade which created their king's *bangor*; this vast 'enclosed settlement', supported and backed by a reed-high defensive earthwork made up of the ancient berms excavated by its original builders. It may have looked like a beaker or a fat bobbin from a bird's eye, as the outer palisades bowed in the middle of the two longest lengths of spike topped wall as if waisted. This enormous, palisaded perimeter bulged north toward the fearsome *Clawdd y Cythrael* ditches which towered over the first row of thatches in the town, and this close proximity to the fort along with the gate and the big northern steps leading up through that tiered monstrosity to it, gave the werrin there a welcome sense of security. The unending outer palisade was studded with watchtowers at regular intervals, and these were always manned by numerous and farsighted Casufel watchmen. Caswallawn had invested a great deal of both his saved and his ill-gotten gold in this hilltop fortress' rebuilding and completion, almost matched by the sum required to reclaim the acres of lush ground around it. Caswallawn had come to accept it as nothing short of a sacrosanct duty, and an obligation of the deepest respect to his amazing predecessors. Whether Brutus had built CaerGwlyb himself Caswallawn could never know, but he felt sure the great man would undoubtedly have visited here and had trodden these lanes and pathways whichever of his noble lords had made this place his home and his defensive bastion. Over the last five years, CaerGwlyb has risen again to a measure of its previous glory after so long in the weeds of a long-forgotten past, except for most of the working people in the adjacent new town, as those proud people know exactly their history. This impressive and stone built, hilltop complex and its vast outer fortress had become infamous among Prydeinig aristocracy however, and Caswallawn's fabulous, Trojan inspired palace became one of the fastest growing capital caers and settlements in all Prydein, both in numbers and

reputation, swelling its owner's burgeoning *bri*, increasing his wealth and spreading his growing repute, the morality of which was a hot topic of discussion currently among those same Prydeinig nobles and commentators, most of whom were present today.

Much of today's talk among the huge gatherings in this inner quadrangle of a packed CaerGwlyb had been about their hosts' most recent land acquisition to the east, but this by necessity was done in careful whispers in unknown company, especially if Caswallawn or any of his gŵyr were near. Despite the possible dangers, rumours of the southern king's controversial night-time conquest were rife among these aristocrats, and as the day passed pleasantly into late afternoon, these Brythons enjoyed one of their most beloved pastimes; gossiping. Arguing was also another of their great loves, and many Brythons would argue on purpose about any mundane thing, just to keep boredom away on those long, dark and cold winter nights when the ale or the mead was all gone.

The ambient sound in this vast interior changed then to Caswallawn's ears, mostly at the lawned area around the base of the western corner tower. This was gloriously bedecked today from its high battlements with his own embroidered banners, all bearing the snarling lynx cygil of his House. These sun-drenched and pale green flags with their fierce cat faces would flap every now and again with this intermittent breeze and show their teeth, and it never failed to lift his spirits. That particularly pleasant location, blessed by late sunshine now had been reserved by Caswallawn for Albion royalty, and their huge boar banner fluttered against that stone and earthen wall below the palisade in the western corner and its tall and square, timber tower. Albion's court lay adjacent to the extensive Khumric clan, arrayed in their splendour fifty reeds further on this huge maes, and Caswallawn had spent the last two hours 'doing the rounds', meeting and greeting all those who could not be overlooked, and he rested now from his exertions with his feet up. Looking across to this elite Albion group, surrounded by its attendant flock of slaves, menestr and arwein, all bustling around in this late afternoon sunshine,

Caswallawn frowned, as surprisingly there was some sort of commotion among them. His Pencampwr Gŵyr Berwyn ap Tudur came into this chamber behind him and came to stand at his right elbow at that disturbing moment. "We have a problem lord." He grunted.

Caswallawn rose quickly and moved to the stone stairs that led down to the courtyard with his eyes still on the Albion royal party now on its feet, and by the sound of things whatever the upshot, it was not good. With his champion at his heels, the southern high king descended these stone stairs two at a time and headed for his western corner tower across this huge maes, now bathed in late sunlight. He took the scene in, and in one quick glance he knew precisely what was about to happen. King Cridas was surrounded by his retinue, and he stood stiffly beside his son whilst his pencampwr was glowering murderously at a finely dressed aristocrat with his back to Caswallawn, but he knew who this man was and his business here tonight without seeing his familiar face, nor that of his big champion standing beside him.

"Wrad you shame us both, we have spoken of this!" Galan complained loudly, pushing through people to face his brother, looking pale and mortified at Wrad's shocking behaviour. A deep concern furrowed the Crown Prince of Epidia's brow, just as their host Caswallawn and his burly champion Berwyn joined them on the cropped grass of this huge compound.

"No brother! You spoke, and I listened, but I will listen to you no more!" Wrad spat back at Galan, and his eyes blazed their defiance at him. "I have expelled your spies and your soldiers from DunOlwen, and I will run my province as my own kingdom from now on brother!" Wrad added bitterly, his broad and bearded face tight with fury.

"Spies? Kingdom?" Galan breathed as a look of shocked and utter disbelief slackened his face. "My caers are your caers are they not brother?" Galan asked him then with his arms wide and his hands open, but his face stiffened now and darkened at the implications of Wrad's declaration. "As was our tad King Cerwyn's dying wish!" He added

forlornly, his arms still held wide, but the knowledge in his heart was mirrored in Galan's sad eyes at that moment. In a heartbeat those eyes hardened, and he stared back at his enraged younger brother now with an unfathomable look, but he held his tongue as he lowered his hands, closing his fists.

"Huh! Possession leads legality, at least in matters of land ownership brother. A concept I'm sure our esteemed host could explain to you!" Wrad spat back at him, turning then and bowing sarcastically to Caswallawn, whose neck flushed pink at the all-too accurate insinuation. This infamously irascible king remained silent in the face of such a personal and emotion filled encounter however, even though it was taking place in his capital caer. Experience told, as one raised finger was enough to stall his pencampwr as he could feel the rage building in the man beside him at the near accusation. Berwyn ap Tudur obeyed his king instantly, who had wisely forestalled his involvement as Caswallawn knew too that with so many proud champions and notable swordsmen in one place and with emotions running high, this situation had to be managed and controlled immediately. Caswallawn knew his people intimately and the people of Prydein as a whole. Their proclivity to take up arms and to fight is legendary, and if things were left to run a natural course here this bright afternoon the alliance would shatter. Blood would run through the storm gutters of his caer and spout into the surrounding ditches like a foul red deluge. None would balk from any fight especially the women, and although only recently oath sworn to alliance and armed with just honour daggers, all would divide instantly into their tribal groups and be enjoined in internecine battle nonetheless, and the ensuing slaughter would be chaotic, joyous and it would be uncontrollable. Caswallawn's armed guards were already making their presence known, and their bright helmets, long mail coats and their high spear blades caught many eyes as these big men began to take up their stations around the walls and courtyards of this colossal fortress. Wrad smiled smugly at this fortuitous and perhaps anticipated development, and he nodded to his champion, who passed him a heavy looking buckskin bag closed tight around the

neck with a hemp drawstring. Wrad hefted this leather bag, and the contents *chinked* softly before he threw it underarm so that it landed at King Cridas' feet.

"Your sarhaed of gold coin, *your majesty!*" Wrad said with a curt bow, making it sound like a curse, and Cridas blanched. "I return it in refusal of your sarhaed as it insults me! I could care less what your boy's royal aunt was able to conjure up to enable the wrongful denial of my spurned suit, so I am here on my own authority to claim what is rightfully mine to claim!" He growled this at Cridas as ferocious looking Albion gŵyr began to surround their king with grave and very serious faces. "I am here to claim from your son the sarhaed of mortal combat." He demanded loudly, and turning, he looked directly at the high king at the head of his gathering Galedonian aristocrats. "I am also here to claim what is mine from you sir; King Ederus of Galedon; the long-promised hand of your daughter and a betrothal oath of twelve years in the waiting!" Wrad growled this contention menacingly at the Galedonian crowd and Ederus in particular, and more serious faces in this caer turned to stone. Turning and pointing at Cadwy standing among the ranks of the shocked Albionau, who was rigid himself and staring bleakly back at him with wide eyes. "You! The cur of Cridas; Price Cadwy of Selgofa!" Wrad was shouting now, his blazing eyes and his accusing finger rigidly marking Cadwy out as the focus of his fury. Pencampwr Turen snarled at the insult to both his high king and his crown prince and coming from one of the 'old enemy' regardless of his royal status it was wholly unacceptable, and so he stepped forward with grim look on his angular face. The dancing sword champion of Selgofa and all Albion began to draw his great sword, fully intending to slaughter both these Galedonian men where they stood for their reckless temerity, but Cridas held him back with a firm hand on his arm.

"No Turen. Prince Wrad is within his rights to claim the sarhaed of mortal combat as you well know, and even as we prayed for Galan's diplomacy to succeed, we all knew too that this day might come." The king of Albion

said this loudly and so that all could hear, but gravely too. Turen pushed back his sword without hesitation, but with an unconcealed disappointment. Cridas turned then to look at his son, who stood to his right looking magnificent in his ceremonial uniform. His heart filled then with pride, as there was not a shred of fear in his boy's eyes nor was there a welcome gleam to combat, just a steely resignation and the mature determination which had blossomed in his impressive son of late. Turen relaxed then under his king's grip and at his wisdom, and Cadwy nodded to his father.

"I am ready tad and well-prepared, and my feelings mirror yours entirely. We all knew this might happen." Cadwy admitted with a shrug, giving Turen a particularly thoughtful look. "Some clearly more than others!" He chuckled, and Turen smiled thinly in return, bowing his head in acknowledgement of his prince's acuity, as he had drilled him mercilessly these last weeks in his very personal and truly elite levels of shield-less sword fighting.

It struck Cadwy like a cold splash of water that he was about to enter a bout of mortal combat. This was a fight to the death, at the age of nineteen and his first real swordfight ever. This shock was quickly overpowered, as it dawned on Cadwy in a rush the reasons for his consummate tutor's recent change in practice drills. The very recent switch from blunt to edged swords now made sense along with all the single combat drills he had sweated at these last couple of weeks. This had all been done under Turen's close, personal supervision instead of the scheduled shield-work, and the man's foresight or perhaps his enviable network of contacts among the warrior class was suddenly enlightening. Cadwy bowed deeply to his mentor then in gratitude, and this was returned with the utmost deference and respect, and then Turen brought *Lladdwyr-glaer* forward from a silk sling at his back. This magnificent sword was fresh from the polisher, and Cadwy's eyes lit with the fire of a genuine passion at the sight of his treasure, tripping his heart. He stripped off his cloak and his ornamental breastplate quickly, handing them both to

Hefin, who stood pale and just a pace behind him to his left, but the young man's eyes blazed his own outrage and challenge at Wrad. Nonetheless Hefin stood motionless, trembling with the effort of self-control as Cadwy laid his sable cloak, the sculpted bronze greaves and the heavy mail shirt and breastplate in his arms. Cadwy demanded his eyes and Hefin tore them from the Epidian warlord to look at his own warlord, and Cadwy was filled with pride at what he saw in those piercing blue eyes he knew so well. No words were necessary between these two childhood combrogi, and Cadwy just nodded to Hefin with a terse grin. It was returned with a nod and a look of utter belief and total support, and it meant a great deal to Cadwy at that moment. Somehow Hefin's unshakeable belief in him calmed his reeling senses and lessened the shock of impending combat in some subtle, ephemeral way, even changing this rush of unsettling feelings into a building confidence, hope even.

"For Eirwen my beloved prince." Hefin said quietly, his eyes sparkling now with his own emotions, and Cadwy squeezed his arm in thanks.

It most certainly would be for Eirwen, for should he fall here today, they both knew she would be forced to go through with the previous contract of betrothal regardless of the danger she would then be put in. For once wed, Eirwen would be the wife of that reckless and hugely ambitious orchestrator of this Epidian rebellion, which by Galan's reaction was sure to end in an internecine bloodbath, and it just could not happen. Ederus would play his part no doubt in stopping this ruthless prince marrying his daughter should he fall, but Cadwy knew also in his heart that it did not have to be him who fell here today, as the outcome of this deadly sarhaed was surely in the hands of the Gods. Turning, Cadwy unclipped the useless but fabulous, curving ceremonial sword from his belt and handed it to Turen with a nod. He was offered in its stead his glorious battle-spirit brother; 'Bright-killer'. Thoughtfully, Cadwy closed his fingers around the plaited leather grip and slowly drew his treasured blade as Turen held the scabbard for him. There was a sharp intake of breath from many who looked on, as the dazzling and flashing beauty of Cadwy's famous

heirloom blade was revealed to the great God Bel above with a *hiss*. Stripped to his bracs, a linen shirt and with his heartbeat rising, Cadwy kissed the beloved hilt of his sword before turning back to face his challenger. His heart was hammering now, but with the blessed juice of action coursing through him along with the keen battle spirit of Lladdwyr-glaer in his right fist, together they fortified him. Pale and still feeling a little tremulous, Cadwy was aware of a fire kindling deep within him, and he realised that he was not half as scared as he had always imagined he would be. He looked up, and Cadwy found himself staring into the dark and flint hard, narrowed eyes of the infamous and celebrated warlord Prince Wrad ap Cerwyn, a leading knight of the legendary Epidiau.

The loud whispers of the maids and all these servants around her were distracting as Eirwen tried to look past one of the big Lynx guards who had just appeared. She leaned to her right around his shining, mail clad bulk to look again at the western tower and the expanse of sunlit and close-cropped grass below it. The royal House of Albion was there reposed and before the enormous cross hung banner of the swirling, hump backed boar of their nation. That large wealthy family and its attendant court looked dazzling, even from across this huge maes. She had caught the occasional sight of her beloved as he performed his duties in his lovely uniform of the *Keeper* of their Honour Guard, and her heart had lifted with every fleeting glimpse. Lydia approached her then with the soft woollen shawl she had asked for, as it had cooled noticeably in this enormous fortress once Bel was in the sky's western quadrant and reddening with the efforts of his journey. She smiled her thanks and took the shawl, throwing it around her shoulders with a practiced flip. Lydia grabbed her wrist then tightly, and Eirwen looked up at her in shock at this sudden and completely out of character act from her handmaiden.

"Arglwydd Brigida! My lady!" Lydia breathed, alarm clear on her young face, and her huge, fear filled eyes were focused across this vast and grassy arena. Lydia's gaze was clearly glued to the Albion corner across this massive field, and Eirwen snapped her head around. Reclaiming her

arm, she focused on that distant crowd as the whispers of the arwein around them suddenly increased in volume, raised an octave and sharpened in tone. Seeing what they all saw, Eirwen's heart lurched into a jagged glacier's crevice, and the icy claws of her darkest fears suddenly closed around it. Standing on uncertain legs and with her breath suspended, Eirwen's eyes flashed to the Albion gathering below that big tower, and as the dreaded circumstances brutally forced their way into her consciousness, her knees felt suddenly weak and unreliable. It was clear in that shocking instant what was about to unfold here this afternoon, and she felt sick to her stomach, which knotted then in a painful spasm of guilt and fear.

"No." She said this quietly to herself and as her anger ignited deep within her.

Whatever form the wrought iron bands of inner strength which supported and drove this woman of such peerless lineage took, their fearsome power emerged once again. It was like an upswell of the crackling and vital essence of a she warrior of old, and flints of amber light sparked dangerously in Eirwen's emerald eyes. She stooped to pick up her long skirts, and this Galedonian princess shot like a silk wrapped arrow for the conflagration ahead, her long and lustrous curls of living auburn hair flaming behind her. Eirwen's feet were a blur as she raced across this cut turf, her beautiful face gripped now with a terrible vision of the intended violence mushrooming massively within her.

Cadwy felt nervous, but he was gripped too by an escalating excitement which he instinctively struggled to quash and to contain, and so he focused on his breathing as he prepared himself, trying to force away the dreadful and soul withering thoughts of defeat which pecked at him, and the unthinkable consequences of that terrified him. Wrad had already handed his dark fur cloak to his champion and was standing facing him with his legs splayed, stretching the fingers of both hands and sneering at him. There was a tight feeling cramping the pit of Cadwy's stomach now, and he felt a little bilious as he appraised his opponent, who was as big

and as muscular as Bleddyn. Wrad's fine physique was evident now he was stripped to a loose sleeved blouse, and a bush of wild black hair sprang from the open neck of the fine white linen. His long and wiry black hair was tied in a tight queue, and his full black beard was trimmed and tidy, exaggerating the whiteness of his teeth when he smiled at Cadwy with a cruel intent. Wrad was a fully grown and powerful man of no small reputation, and looked to be in his absolute prime as he bent his knees and stretched his long, powerful legs which were clothed in dark woollen bracs and tucked into immaculate cavalry boots of a glossy black. He was a famous warrior who had been trained by the very best of mounted swordsmen and had slain many gelyn if rumours were to be believed. Cadwy had been brought up to hold no regard for rumour however, and despite his inexperience, he knew, as all combatants did that you only really found the truest and deepest measure of another warrior by fighting him to the death. Cadwy felt an enormous compulsion then to look around once more to his tad, but again acting on strong instincts he fought this urge, missing completely the scene unfolding behind him, as a furiously approaching, flame haired she devil was only yards away now and closing fast.

Eirwen was suddenly picked up like a straw doll in mid step and by one huge and muscular, tattooed arm. Her mouth flew open, and her slim legs flailed for a moment before she recognised her captor and calmed herself. A few stern words in her ear from the huge ghost-warrior changed her demeanour in an instant. Once he had put her down, she began to nod at the wisdom of her protector Olwydd, realising coldly that the last thing Cadwy needed was a hysterical girl distracting him. She gracefully slipped from the giant's grasp then and with a look of utter gratitude to the man. She drew herself up, taking a deep breath to calm and to compose herself. Eirwen's head lifted then, and this teenage aristocrat strode toward her prince and her future husband with a haughty, regal air of complete confidence.

Cadwy's eyes opened wide as Eirwen came to stand by him, and his heart hammered a little differently as she unwound a pretty ribbon of green silk from her arm. Turning to wind it around his right bicep, she smiled up at him with that most dazzling, most unsettling smile of hers. It illuminated Cadwy's universe in that instant and carried with it the unbreakable promise that with Eirwen by his side, everything in that same universe would be all right. Without a word, she tied her silk around Cadwy's sword arm and with the utmost care, ignoring the hate-filled glares and the rude jeers of Wrad and his champion from across the grass behind her, aided by the crescent of Wrad's rough warriors who supported them.

"Your *boy* will need one of those around his pretty little throat shortly, my *lady*!" Wrad sneered, exaggerating both titles and adding insult to his threat.

A small part of Cadwy's mind registered this sarhaed as Eirwen stiffened a little, but the vast majority of his consciousness was focused and directed by Cythera in these magnetic moments and as they both rode *Her* thunderbolt once more. Their eyes locked like the powerful alignment of ancient ley lines, and the world itself seemed to pause. Cadwy was surprised when Eirwen broke the embrace and looked across at Wrad with such a poisonous disdain, it was as if he were a lousy tramp who had just entered her thatch uninvited. Turning back to Cadwy, she took his pale face in her hands and kissed him full on the lips, and the sound this still gathering crowd around them uttered was a strange mixture of sadness and hope. This stunning princess broke from the powerful, hypnotic current which drew these two young nobles together and she looked over her shoulder once more at the big and bearded man who had insulted her and who now threatened her whole future.

"Kill the old fool my darling!" She said loudly, looking Wrad up and down with an obvious and scornful contempt as if he were a stray dog jumping with fleas. "Either way he is a dead man! For if I am forced to his marriage bed, I will cut his throat myself on our wedding night and the blooded sheets will tell an entirely different story the next morning!" She said icily,

throwing Wrad the most evil look she could muster, along with the darkest but wordless curses she had learned at college. She was letting him know in no uncertain terms that if Cadwy lost this fight and Wrad proceeded with his demand for their marriage, the honeymoon would be anything but pleasant. Loud cheering and much mocking laughter broke from the Albion and Galedonian crowds at this and from most of this surrounding throng. Eirwen turned on her heel and departed with a dismissive air to much applause, all the way back to her cheering and proud Galedonau.

Wrad spat on the ground at this obvious display of her love for that boy, and he railed at this public rejection of his own long-standing suit, turning his back on them and slashing angrily at the air with his sword as hatred swelled inside him. 'Win or lose, the handfasting was off! She was to have played a big and public part in his coronation and the founding of his own new kingdom, but Ederus could keep the frigid little bitch as far as he was concerned. He was not about to let that duplicitous, red haired little snake anywhere near his bedchambers now.' He told himself this furiously as he watched her depart, wishing now that he had kept hold of that big bag of Albion gold. 'But he will kill *lover boy* in front of her, her pompous father and all these soft southern nobles and that will suffice, and anyway there are plenty more fish in the sea.' Wrad spat again to this hand cut Casufel grass and began to rotate his muscular shoulders. The huge crowd in this fortress had naturally gathered around this western corner like birds to a tilled field to witness this calamitous event, and the bated whispers of these onlookers flitted about like nervous starlings. Many surreptitious wagers were taken between warrior and civilian alike in this crowd, and the tension ratcheted up a few notches as the combatants came to face each other.

"Did you hear a raven call out your name last night *puppy*?" Gŵyr Elgan ap Bram, Wrad's grisly champion called out, laughing at his own mockery of the teenage Albion prince who had dared challenge his warlord.

Cadwy had to react quickly to step in front of Bleddyn, who's animated face was filling with the blood of intended slaughter as he watched. The

knuckles of his champion's right hand had whitened ominously around the grip of his sword, and his bearded face was a mask. Bleddyn would not meet his eyes and looked around him, his eyes locked and blazing death at the laughing Epidian pencampwr, the aching desire to draw his sword and to attack the man shining bright in his pleading eyes, but Cadwy shook his head, demanding his gaze with a firm hand on his shoulder. Somehow and with a supreme effort, Bleddyn tore his eyes from those of Elgan's and he looked at Cadwy once more, his livid eyes refocusing.

"I will kill that man." Bleddyn told him quietly, and in such a neutral and emotionless tone his calm words just dripped gravitas, and they carried with them an unshakeable certainty, one which was mirrored in his unyielding eyes at that moment.

"I forbid you Bleddyn on *this* day, my valiant and honourable pencampwr! Unless Wrad dishonours the field of course." Cadwy added quietly, but his instruction carried an unmistakeable authority. The Epidian champion was not finished, and behind them he strutted in front of his men.

"We have trained at night my young prince and your younger *champion!*" The man chortled at the last word, and his gŵyrd laughed on cue behind him.

Cadwy had to grab Bleddyn's shoulders with both hands as his bearded face and the laughter behind them swelled.

"We have trained under the stars as you slept like babies, and we are comforted by this unquestionable advantage!" Gŵyr Elgan announced in his gruff voice, and his gŵyrd nodded their support of this age-old superstition, but Cadwy ignored it completely and held Bleddyn's gaze.

"No response my beloved combrogi. None! It is a direct order from he who holds your sword-sworn blood oath, and I tell you to stand down Bleddyn ap Arawn. This is my fight!" Cadwy told him firmly but with the utmost love and respect, and the tension in the big man's shoulders dissipated somewhat. As the lights of combat faded in his stark eyes, Bleddyn took a final glance at Wrad's crowing champion.

“One day my prince, I will kill that fat, mouthy turd. I swear it on Cornonnyn’s horns!” Bleddyn growled, but his shoulders dropped as he finally capitulated.

Thus satisfied, Cadwy turned once more to face Wrad across this grass, who was standing now next to his champion Elgan and still slashing at the air with his marvellous, glittering sword of fame; *Terryll-dyr*.

“I can’t wait to see the look on the face of Cridas’ puppy when he leaves this world, and that of great King Cridas himself when he sees Terryll-dyr’s sharp tip emerge from the back of his precious and only son’s head!” He said this with a laugh, turning to his champion who now wore his *black-mare* cygil emblazoned across his white tabard. This black mare prancing on its white background now also wore the golden crown of state around its neck as Galan’s white on black cygil does. This blatant declaration of independence had been well noted, and by all who had interest and knowledge of such matters. Wrad’s infamous blade ‘Piercing-steel’ made a whistling, *whooshing* sound as it cut the air, and the fist in the pit of Cadwy’s stomach closed again then like a claw around his guts.

The popularity and fame of this young couple had clearly polarised these onlookers into a massive following, leaving Wrad to lead a minute fraction from the shadows. It was evident who this huge crowd of noble people had assigned the opposing sides of light and shade to in this encounter, but the derisive laughter and this overwhelming support for the Albion prince only darkened Wrad’s features, seeming to harden his resolve and further animate the man. King Cridas however was not cheering, and his taut, ashen face bore a deadly serious expression. His steel blue eyes blazed their outrage at Wrad, but he stood like a statue to bear witness to whatever was about to ensue. Galan’s large Epidian gathering under their banners of the *white-stallion* remained tense and silent, they too nervously awaiting the outcome of this evening’s debacle. Much had already been hurriedly discussed and decided between the crown prince and his enraged gŵyrd however, and there were some hardening faces in that animated crowd this late and fraught afternoon. Ederus and his

Gŵyrd y Gogledd were arrayed under their glorious *golden-stag* banners of state and alongside the *white-stallion* banners of his chosen vassals. He and his legendary men stood behind Galan's Epidians in clear support, and Ederus seemed the only person in that throng who looked completely unsurprised at Wrad's treacherous insurrection. All in this inner fortress of CaerGwlyb seemed to hold their collective breaths now as the rare and dread moment of 'royal sarhaed' had finally arrived.

'Arglwydd Camulo, I offer you my prayer and I ask for your blessing. You are the everlasting lord of war; the great red God of battle, and I beseech you to aid me as I fight in your name!' Cadwy sent the obligatory but silent prayer to his chosen God. He took his own time now, to stretch his muscular shoulders and to bend his knees. He was already physically ready, so now he was focusing his mind to the life-threatening work at hand as he paced this grass, his eyes never leaving those of Wrad. He was not going to let this sneering scoundrel anywhere near Eirwen, as the Gods only knew what he would do with her once back at DunOlwen. As he expelled his apprehension and his fears with a huge and explosive breath, an unspoken signal passed between them, and they both began to close on each other.

Wrad moved first with a lightning stroke that would have decapitated him had he not parried it instinctively, and Cadwy slipped the blade, surprised by the speed and the horrifying strength of this man. He moved his feet then as he had been taught, concentrating on his balance in movement and neatly anticipating another attack, sidestepping it quickly whilst holding the guard as he slipped past the man again, Wrad's blade making a fleeting and harmless contact with his own. Cadwy was beginning to pant like a junior and so he steeled himself to employ his breathing techniques, quickly having to move once more as Wrad wrongfooted him, forcing him into a defensive parry again, this time over his head. Wrad chopped down on his high guard with his heavy sword, forcing Cadwy's blade downwards with his great strength, but Cadwy spun away before Wrad could deliver another such mighty blow. He could feel sweat

popping out from his prickling skin all over his body now as he moved smoothly to his left, holding his sword upright and ready, thoughts of Eirwen and her predicament crowding his mind still. Turen caught his eye then from the periphery, and the man tapped his left temple three times with a finger. 'Stop thinking!' The man mouthed these words, and they were heard clearly in his mind from years of constant repetition. Cadwy nodded then, more to himself and as his eyes flashed back to Wrad's. This simple reminder gave him immeasurable support and a focus around which he could rally his courage for some inane reason. Cadwy stood more upright then and something welled up inside him like a clear blue bubble of emptiness, and his nerves calmed, his concerns beginning to fall away. The plainer but broader picture emerged as he circled his enemy, and Turen's overarching credo; 'reading your opponent and imposing your will upon him' took focus. His unease at the possible consequences and the mental clamour of this combat lessened in the face of this simplifying but vital perception, and Cadwy took a deep breath. Looking again at his rival as they circled each other, Cadwy noticed for the first time the crow's feet of concern around the older man's narrowed eyes, and the almost invisible shadows that lurked in their dark recesses now. He was breathing heavily too, and Cadwy realised then that Wrad was just another man. If Cadwy's renown was a fledgling thing currently, *pencampwr* of Albion Turen's was not, and being *his* star pupil carried its own sackful of kudos. Cadwy took another huge breath at that moment, and his mind settled further and began to empty as he prepared for Wrad's next assault. As he exhaled forcibly, Wrad came again quickly, and their swords clashed between them, each using his strength to test the other as they levered, pushed and shoved in the *gwaith y cledd*, their sword edges sparking maliciously as they bit into each other. Following a brief struggle and with their swords still gnashing at each other in this fleeting period of close 'sword work', Cadwy used his technique and his strength to lever Wrad up and away from him, and his broad shoulders bulged with the effort as he pushed him away and reset his stance. The slightest flicker of surprise in Wrad's eyes when he was forced to take two backward steps was like a

draught of the sweetest, coolest water to Cadwy, and he was sweating freely now and breathing properly and deeply for the first time. His feet seemed to move of their own volition now too as he sidestepped the next attack, but Wrad had anticipated this and his blade flicked out, aimed at the arteries inside his wrist. Cadwy escaped this deadly cut more by luck than craft as Wrad's sword tip had bounced harmlessly off the iron wristband he wore. Cursing inwardly as he stepped away, Cadwy was instantly aware of the danger, and his heart thumped loudly now in his chest. His wrist felt numb from the blow and his scalp prickled at the near miss, but he was thankfully uninjured. These arteries were also part of his own list of targets, but the sneaky move had fuelled Cadwy's fire, and he nodded at Wrad now, smiling coldly as the warrior in him finally surfaced completely. His features hardened as the final strings of tension relaxed in his shoulders, and he reset his posture now with glittering eyes. Wrad came in swiftly again and Cadwy watched almost in slow time as the man's hands began to rotate and his sword tip rise, beginning its long arc as he went for the high attack once more. Cadwy stood his ground and hard parried the stroke well once more, stepping neatly away from the exchange, but Wrad was on him again, once again going for the power stroke which had unbalanced him moments earlier. Cadwy stood firm once more to take the blow and their blades clashed again, but with his superb balance in movement, Cadwy was able to sidestep gracefully and disengage beautifully following the perfectly timed parry, pirouetting away and leaving Wrad hanging. The man's immense power was telling still however, and Cadwy positioned himself carefully, never taking his eyes from his opponent's. He continued these defensive manoeuvres, ably countering Wrad's openings and attacks, and twice more he made a high guard, escaping Terryll-dyr's razor-sharp edge with his agility and a superb form, and he was learning so much at lightning speed in this fight, it was impossible to quantify. It became obvious quite quickly to Cadwy however that the overhead power stroke was clearly an Epidian knight's favourite of such deadly strikes, and these slashing and cutting moves had obviously been well trained and mastered by all their mounted

warriors. Wrad's eyes were triumphant as he seemed to have discovered precisely Cadwy's weakness now, and thus emboldened, he performed those tricky and entirely superfluous jab steps with his feet again. His hands began to rotate once more in the familiar routine, and Cadwy stood his ground, moving to his high guard again quickly. Their swords clashed above his head again, but it was a different Lladdwyr-glaer which bit into Terryll-dyr at that sparking, cataclysmic fraction of time. Suddenly it was a different man on the other end too. Cadwy sprung his trap, and the shock of the perfect parry made with such precision and power, forced Wrad's look of triumph to dissolve into one of fearful doubt. The parry was made with such irresistible force and with such pure and thoughtless timing, it caused vibrations to shoot down the steel of Wrad's sword to bite his fingers, making his eyes fly open in surprise. Cadwy's eyes blazed back at him, and he broke his wrists suddenly, making the slope of '*allt y bryn*' with his blade, as so often drilled into him by Turen over the years, and so that Wrad's sword just slipped off it. Terryll-dyr flashed downward, skittering down the full length of Lladdwyr-glaer with little control, and whilst its owner's slightly unbalanced momentum forced him to complete his onward movement with an extra step forward, causing his sword to dip further.

'Get the sword arm exposed and attack it!' Turen's calm words spoke in his mind, and Cadwy made his planned lightning strike with a powerful downward whip cut. Lladdwyr-glaer's hungry tip struck home near the intended target now exposed, and Wrad's proud blade fell to the grass from his numbed fingers. The Epidian prince gasped loudly in pain, grabbed his injured wrist with his free hand and then took a knee to recover with his eyes huge. Cadwy was able to tune out the tumultuous sound which erupted around him then and which surprisingly hardly penetrated the adamantine shell of his focus as he circled Wrad on the ground. Casually, he held Lladdwyr-glaer's mortal tip under Wrad's chin, freezing the man's reaching hand. Then he lifted the bearded chin with his blade, forcing the man to look up at him. The hatred in his brown eyes still blazed at him, but there was fear in them now too, the wrinkles around his

eyes and across his forehead deeper and more pronounced. Cadwy curled his lip and then stepped quickly away, turning his back in insult and signalling him brusquely to pick up his fallen sword.

The cheering and the applause from the crowd, at the tactical counterstroke and this clear insult which followed washed over Cadwy now as he stepped easily away on the grass, watching closely as Wrad wrapped a kerchief around his bleeding wrist before picking up his sword again to face him. There was not enough blood coming from Wrad's wound to confirm his intended target of the artery, as Cadwy had wanted to show his opponent the correct way to deliver the stroke he had almost cut him with earlier, but at least the strike had connected and had injured the man's sword hand. He would now need to use both hands to wield his sword, and an altogether different look took hold of Wrad's broad and bearded face as he reset his stance. Although he tried valiantly to hide it with bluster, all could see the concern now etching Wrad's dark features, and it drew two deep parentheses around his terse mouth which even his thick and black beard could not hide. Something changed then for Cadwy too, a tickle of a feeling but a growing one, somehow linked inexplicably to his hunting alarm, and he felt something profound shift on this field of combat then and in his favour. It was born subconsciously amid the mass of information his brain was processing from the minutia of this fight, and from his ongoing assessment of his own performance and that of his adversary. Self-belief, confidence, honour and pride were all invested in this volatile amalgam of emotions which bloomed now, and it released from deep within him a battle spirit so fierce and so skilled, Cadwy's real flair and expertise finally emerged fully and for the first time in his life. The warrior spirit which Cadwy did not even know existed within him was born, and it blossomed like a deadly black flower on this cropped green grass. As the late summer sunshine darkened into bloodier hues above this Casufelawny caer and the shadows of all these people crept silently across its battlements, Cadwy's footwork was suddenly empirical and his balance almost perfect. The silhouettes of these duelling men lengthened and loomed, dancing madly around them on the walls of this fortress as

they fought to the death in this calamitous royal sarhaed and within this huge clearing of noisy people. The young Albion prince began to discover his true self in this fight, acknowledging the real and dark, pitiless warrior who emerged like a bleak winter sunrise from deep within him. His balance in movement became a masterclass for all to see, and for the next few minutes Cadwy danced around Wrad easily, making him sweat and pant like a worn out set of forge bellows. The noise from this packed crowd of onlookers had risen and fallen intermittently throughout this fight as it swung one way or another, but there were some howls of derision from many of the watching warriors now as Wrad's increasingly wild strokes cut nothing but fresh air. Cadwy deftly wrongfooted him continually, forcing him to stumble and to look like a rank amateur before all northern Prydein, as he stepped lightly around him like a dancer. It was evident to all *which* master had been instructing this impressive young Tywysog, and that same, notoriously *deft* sword master looked on expressionless from King Cridas' side. Although stared at all afternoon by the many, the legendary dancing pencampwr of Albion surveyed this bout with a face of granite, but his dark eyes had blazed with an intense pride throughout.

It seemed to the many other swordsmen present that Wrad was rusty in terms of real sword combat and had perhaps relied too much and too long on the threat of his champion, foregoing his own vital sword training as many lords had done in the past. Although known for their horseback fighting and less so perhaps for their combat on foot, many Epidian knights have been forced to immediately blow off the cobwebs of inactivity in a surprise foot fight however and forced too then to rely on their training to save themselves, but it was Wrad's lack of fitness and stamina that began to tell now, as this fight had become protracted. Snarling with frustration, Wrad pursued the dancing Cadwy across this cleared circle on the turf, but however biting his frustration, it could not mask the new look of horrified amazement in those eyes as Cridas' puppy was transformed into Cridas' monster.

Cadwy already knew how this fight would end, as he had seen his opening and knew exactly how to exploit it to his gain. He had not mounted one attack yet since he had injured Wrad's wrist and had been content to tire the man. He was also keen to show him up for his obduracy, skipping around him and making him look foolish. He easily sidestepped Wrad again who was red in the face now and sweating heavily, his linen shirt soaked in two great circles around his armpits. The blood continued to drip from his injured wrist, and he was beginning to blow, but he was far from done and eminently dangerous still. With a grimace of gritted white teeth blazing through his black beard, the big Epidian prince charged again, twisting his wrists for the faugh cut and lunge he had tried earlier in the fight. It was what Cadwy had waited patiently for, and he read it instantly, feinting left before stepping quickly back to his right. His feet acted instinctively as he began to drop into the crouch, swivelling on his right heel and moving with a fluid grace that belied his size and stature, turning and stepping neatly into the required zone as Wrad's extended blade missed him completely. His feet moved apart, finding a perfect centre of balance and the correct low stance behind Wrad without thought. His perception seemed to zoom into slow motion again, and Cadwy felt at the very zenith of his existence at that precise moment. As the fractions of seconds passed slowly but inexorably and as Wrad's body passed him, he consciously felt the tension in his bent right leg and affirmed the grip of that foot, more specifically the ball of the foot and the contact his big toe made with the ground. It was there that the stroke was born.

With Cadwy's mind now reposed in Cornonnyn's white zone of clarity, his torso was already twisted in preparation like a powerful, wound-up spring. As Wrad moved past him, his rash and unfocused swing and his resulting forward momentum into vacated space had exposed his back, and Cadwy's tensed right leg exploded into action now, driving hard into the earth and initiating the potent uncoiling of his torso. His hips swung around too, adding their power and momentum to this burst of unrestrained cyclical power. This rotating eruption of his core strength

was rooted through his right foot into the earth and was massively amplified by the unloading of his muscular trunk, his broad shoulders swinging around with this unwinding action and releasing an enormous, compressed power. His bulging arms were also taut and engaged as Lladdwyr-glaer became a shimmering blur, cleaving the air on its glittering arc to the target. Without thought and as Wrad straightened with his back to him, Cadwy swayed forward, transferring his weight into the stroke, and his strong wrists snapped the sword through the most perfect power cut anyone present had ever seen. Lladdwyr-glaer's deadly tip streaked to an incalculable velocity, and with the merest *snick* of sound, Wrad's hirsute head seemed to fly from his shoulders to go spinning high up into the air, spiralling arcs of bright blood around it. The roar from the crowd was deafening as Wrad's bearded head hit the grass with a dull *thud* and rolled, coming to a bloody stop at Cridas' feet, and it looked up at the king with a flushed expression of shocked surprise. As Cridas looked down in astonishment, Wrad's eyes blinked once and then glazed over as his spirit finally departed toward the bridge of swords. The standing body still fountained hot and steaming blood into the evening air for long moments, before that headless torso finally slumped untidily to the ground, where it glugged the remains of its contents into the torn and muddied grass of its departed owner's own choosing.

Cadwy was breathing heavily and deeply as he surveyed the scene at his bloodied feet, his soul soaring to the heavens. He was trembling with an overload of the juice of action, and which coursed wildly through his throbbing veins now as he looked down at the remains of the first man he had ever killed. Olwydd Hîr was standing languidly ten reeds away, and the huge warrior met Cadwy's gaze boldly at that moment as did his screaming blue charm. With an appreciative shrug of his prodigious moustaches and both dense eyebrows, the huge ghost-warrior nodded twice to Cadwy and turned on his heel. A scented, silken and irrepressible force of nature then assailed him from behind, as Eirwen had leapt on him in her uncontainable excitement and joy. Cadwy dropped his sword and turned to sweep Eirwen up into the air, exchanging one fierce love for a

far deeper one. His face broke out then into his own bright smile, the one which always changed that unfathomable look in *her* eyes to one of a far deeper meaning. The clamour of the celebrating crowd rebounded loudly from the hard walls of this caer as the enjoined royal families of all Prydein's noble Houses closed in on the enwrapped young couple at its rejoicing heart, but neither Cadwy or Eirwen heard a sound as they had lost themselves in each other, kissing deeply on the same torn and blood spoiled grass. In their private, intimate world they were far away from Casufelawny, embracing once more on the crown of that misty, imaginary mountain which belonged to them and them alone.

Gŵyr Elgan ap Bram and the *black-horse* Epidians were devastated, and their fate seemed sealed as Galan's *white-stallion* gŵyrd surrounded the small gathering of once proud and rebellious warriors, who seemed to have shrunk in both stature and demeanour from the defeat. Their solemn pencampwr was allowed to gather the sword and the bodily remains of his prince, but King Cridas had placed his booted foot on Wrad's bloody and bearded head in ownership when Elgan had stooped to collect it. The champion had looked up in surprise, but the stark, marble outrage on the king of Albion's face was a challenge he could not hope to meet, and so Elgan accepted the inevitable, withdrawing with a bow.

"Look!" Someone shouted, and all eyes followed a finger to the sky, which was aflame with a glorious sunset but where a red comet now blazed its colourful demise in the heavens, and all were agog at such a portentous omen as it was surely one of Camulo's prophetic fire arrows. Nobody who was present that evening looked at Prince Cadwy ap Cridas in the same way again, as that boy had finally become a man. 'What a man' was a phrase formed on many a pair of lips, as their prince was surely favoured by the Gods, who obviously had great plans for the crown prince of Albion as their heavenly celebration assured all here assembled. The highly charged atmosphere which had gripped Caswallawn's CaerGwlyb eventually thinned and lightened as bets were settled and interests were turned once again to the gossip and the food laden tables, along with the

tall jugs of curmi-da and the great steaming cauldrons of warm mead. The rulers retreated to the inner keep for a final council of war, leaving the huge number of nobles on the great spread of inner grounds to finish the lavish feast, and for the gŵyr of Albion to commence a wild party of their own.

Brythonic agents had revealed that events across the southern channel had gathered pace, and so decisions had been made by those who make them, and royal orders had been drawn up to mobilise this vast host of warriors tomorrow. At dawn, they would begin the thirty odd mile journey south through the burgeoning, ripening farmlands of southern Casufelawny. They would arrive at its border with the Belgic lands of the Rheginau and Atrebatau and at one of Prydein's eleven sacred crossroads, which sacred location forms the adjoining boundaries between those three small kingdoms and where a small, stone-built temple to Apollo had long been founded. There they would camp overnight, before blessings and supplications were made to the Gods at this holy place the following day. Once spiritually cleansed and fortified at sunrise, some would cross the border and continue southwest into Atrebata to their duties, whilst the host would travel east and across the rich southern borderlands of Casufelawny. They will turn south to cross at their south-eastern border with the Rheginau and pass into their staunchly allied territory, where these armies will receive reception and refreshment. Then in greater numbers, they will push southeast across Rhegin and across their eastern border with Caint, picking up more allied warriors along the way. They would keep pushing south over that border and head constantly toward the coast throughout that day, and to where the armies had been tasked to assemble at a pre-determined location. This well-known place of encampment would allow them to be centrally placed and able to respond swiftly to any point along that lookout guarded coast. This vast assembly point is a broad plain, ringed by a group of low but protective hills in a tactically advantageous location. There, just a few miles from Caint's rugged and threatened coast they would erect a *cadlys*; an enormous, allied war camp from where they would await the arrival of a huge

number of still gathering and travelling bands of family or comrades from across Lloegr. From the opposite direction and across the sacred channel of Môr Udd, they would also await the uninvited arrival of one Gaius Julius Caesar and his merciless machine of conquest. All had heard that a Roman officer had been spotted offshore by Brythonic lookouts. Fishermen had reported seeing a dark skinned and clean-shaven man with short cut black hair, dressed in a sheet and standing on the prow of big, foreign looking warship, which had sailed boldly along the south coast before vanishing back across the channel. This overt reconnaissance was confirmation of recent intelligences, and it was generally accepted by those whose opinions mattered as a sure sign of Caesar's imminent intentions.



Chapter Fifteen.

The majority of Caesar's huge invasion fleet finally lay prepared and secured in Bononia; northern Gaul's biggest harbour, now known only as Portus Itius. This captive port was chock full of large Roman transport shipping and making any toing and froing in the confines of the harbour a fraught affair at best. Due to this constriction and the fact that five of the cavalry's recently floated ships were still in the last stages of completion, the rest of the cavalry ships were to be held further up the coast at Portus Ulterior. The general had been nervously advised that five of the nine ships remaining there under construction would take another week to finish at least. Even though dozens of sailors swarmed over each of them, setting out and fitting the new rigging to the spars and attaching the great sails to the masts in record time, there was still too much left to do for those ships to be ready for the launch. When pushed by Caesar, the *Praetorium Fabrum* had told him that two would be ready by the noon watch tomorrow and would join the other two finished barques in the bay, but the other five needed more structural work and would not be ready. The general knew better than to question Mamurra's judgement and took his report as fact. The first revision from twenty-five to twenty had caused huge problems, but this further reduction to eighteen ships galled Caesar. In his officers' opinions, it had pushed them past the point of minimum military requirement, and Mamurra himself had lobbied for more time, for many reasons. Both Caesar's cavalry officers; Legate Titus Labienus and Quaestor Quintus Longinus had, when pressed agreed that they could fit a little less than four thousand cavalry of their 10th on the eighteen ships which would be ready and complete. Over a thousand mounted equites would have to remain at the fortress with the auxiliary soldiers of the garrison, and they had also advised him that much equipment would have to be designated surplus and left on the beach just to accommodate those cavalry. Alternatively, at least two Cohors Militaire from the 7th would

need to be consigned to barrack duty. This information was imparted at his last war council and when all his general staff officers, legates, tribunes, advisors and scribes had gathered to thrash out the final details of this expedition. Almost all his staff had counselled patience until the remaining ships were complete, as they were already extremely pressed for space and even two more ships would make a huge difference, but five more ships would allow them to take all the cavalry and much vital equipment. They had cut back hard on their provisions and equipment already, and now pressed to reduce this even more it unsettled the more experienced officers. They too had advised waiting for the arrival of much needed kit and equipment in a resupply caravan which had recently passed through the lands of the vanquished Lignones. In just the last few days it had crossed over Greater Celtica's northern border and into Belgica. This long line of ox-drawn carts was making its ponderous way across vanquished Remi territory in central Belgica currently and was expected here in about a week. That baggage train contained much of the provisions that would make Caesar's undertaking more viable and less reliant on the foraging and hunting required to feed these two legions. Those carts held more than enough 'buccellatum' to allow each man his required sixteen-day ration of this hardtack at least, which was used to supplement the soldier's daily corn ration known as their 'frumentum'. Whilst grain was readily foraged at this time of year almost anywhere, meat was often problematic especially in unknown hunting territory. Those valuable supplies also contained loads of ammunition, some in the form of elongated and lozenge shaped lead shot for the slingers, and these projectiles would spin and buzz loudly whilst whizzing through the air, giving them far more accuracy than plain round shot. This regulation small shot was packed in boxes for the Balearic slingers, and larger round and hand carved five-pounders had been included for the artillery pieces, making them far more deadly accurate than when firing crude boulders and elevating these critical weapons into another league. There were many hundreds of expertly made and balanced darts aboard this wagon train too, destined for the auxiliary troops which were not only lead

slingers from the Balearic Isles, as there were archers from Numidia and Libritors from Crete amongst these disparate cohorts of soldiers making up the Macedonian Auxiliary. Thousands of superior arrows were on that wagon train and would have been packed for the archers in their transit formers, meaning they could keep their homemade equivalents in reserve, and their overall accuracy would also be greatly increased. Only Pinarius had agreed with Caesar that the launch should go ahead as planned, but he was ignored by all for obvious reasons and the young tribune had flushed a deep beetroot, remaining at the rear and silent for the remainder of the council.

Those senior officers had all realised that Caesar was on the horns of a dilemma; 'Does he go now with reduced capacity, or does he wait for the five extra ships and the wagon train, completing his forces and equipment but courting disaster from the approaching storm season?' The ones who had served with him longest and knew him best knew too that all his pieces were in place and his preparations were complete, and now that he was ready and within striking distance they were sure he would not wait any longer as his impulsive nature would propel him along this headlong and reckless rush to glory.

The Buccinator blew for the last watch change of the night, and the headquarters pavilions began to empty as the officers retired to their sleeping quarters, leaving just the two senior *optio praetorii* whose dominion this now was. These impressive men were always trusted and seasoned *optio principalii* and who, for their heroic service and administrative abilities were permanently attached to these headquarters, and these two garrulous officers would stand their guard here throughout the night. This pair of proud and battle-hardened, much-decorated warriors had served under Caesar when they had crossed the Rhine into Greater Germania several years previously and where they had battled those huge and ferocious warrior tribesmen. One was missing the fingers from his left hand, and he had been scoured with enormous, diagonal facial scars. The other had lost his right eye in the war and limped badly,

but although damaged these two tough leaders were feared throughout the enlisted men of these sleeping legions, as they were known to take no prisoners in all senses of the term. These imperious senior optios were also tasked with extra duties from their legendary general on the night shifts, that of taking his two enormous, German boar hounds out when necessary. As they bent to collect German dog shit from the grass, the irony was not lost on either man.

As this camp fell silent around them, over sixteen thousand men lay in their sleeping lines inside and around the walls of this walled fortress, and whilst some snored loudly, others struggled to sleep especially the inexperienced tirones, whose vivid imaginations were troubled by terrifying visions of their own bloody deaths in the pioneering days to come. Visions of being gripped in the long-fanged jaws of some gargantuan and writhing, mythical beast in an alien and undiscovered land shattered their restless slumber. Every soul in this huge camp was inevitably caught up in this heightened atmosphere and there was a tangible feeling of anticipation in the air. The many which sleep cruelly evaded busied themselves with small tasks, and some whittled wooden figures of Gods, Goddesses or family members, whilst a great many honed already razor-sharp weapons; anything to fill their minds and to occupy their trembling fingers. Most of this was done around their campfires and as the alert men of each mess group tried to relax and talk quietly amongst themselves, whilst those who had not yet written a will did so and handed them to their officers for safekeeping. Only the centurions, optios and their most seasoned soldiers seemed to be able to relax, and these experienced leaders passed through the long lines of campfires nodding and chatting to the sleepless men. Their presence eased their soldiers' troubled minds with their calm authority and their utter belief; that if everyone followed orders they would vanquish any force in the known world put in front of them. Despite these reassurances, it was the unknown world they were preparing to invade, and so, as this camp settled down in darkness, fear stalked these sleeping lines like a hungry

black dog, seeking out veterans and recruits alike and making their sleep fitful at best, but vivid and horrifyingly nightmare filled at worst.

This sense of anticipation continued to build slowly throughout the following morning on the white sands of Mamurra's *fabrum* as soldiers jumped to the shouts and whistles of the centurions, hurrying here and there as they finalised every detail of this complex undertaking. Marcus Vitruvius Mamurra, the tenth's *praefectus fabrum* was an equestrian of noble birth, hailing originally from the wealthy Italian city of Formiae and from a successful family there established. He had served with Caesar for several years as the commander of his engineers, and as a skilled and highly trained designer, draughtsman, fabricator, bridge and weapon builder he had no equal. By his sheer ingenuity, Mamurra had saved his general's skin on several occasions in their long history. Utterly irreplaceable to Caesar, this well-regarded officer was a stickler for the rules and regulations, and nobody had ever been able to pass off any substandard work in any *fabrum* he oversaw. His punishments were legendary, as was his fearsome reputation. Mamurra had tasked his centurions to use their *vitii* freely today as he was being leaned on heavily from above, and although this pressure from his superiors was almost a perpetual state of existence in his business, he had an idea of how close run this venture was going to be. These white sands of Portus Ulterior and the little village of Duru Gwîn nearby were filled with his engineering immunes and the numerous soldiers he had tasked to assist them, and they rushed between the nearby forest and the beach *fabrum* with fresh timber loaded onto their mule-drawn carts. As this clammy and sticky afternoon sailed away with the sun, the centurions' whistles shrieked in unison at this sweat soaked *fabrum* on Traith Gwîn, and they called a well-received halt to the proceedings, as all hands were ordered to down tools and to assemble in their marching formations. The tide was rushing in as it did in these parts, and the two completed vessels were soon afloat, where the navy immunes could stow the ballast stones in the bilges and then shift, add or subtract from these as necessary to get these ships trimmed and ready to sail. Only the expensive and necessary tools and

items were retrieved from these soft white sands, and the rest; two huge and almost complete transport ships alongside another five hulks in various stages of completion remained. There were tall pyramids of huge barrels, yards of timber spars, mounds of canvas sails, and mountains of finest hemp rope discarded where they lay, as time had finally run out for Mamurra and his exhausted immunes. Glad of the change in routine, these weary soldiers followed the reddening sun and marched the few miles west back to their encampment, just in time to join the general assembly and the start of the evening's first watch. After rollcall, the men had been fallen out to eat, rest and to prepare themselves for tonight. Even the exhausted soldiers from the fabrum were excited and completely caught up in the anticipation of this night as darkness fell on Fortress Bonon, and the lead gaming pieces were moving all across this fortress as were the resulting coins of payment. These high spirits were tempered somewhat by the dark shadow of pre-battle apprehension and especially so on this adventure into the utterly unknown. All had been excused duties for this evening, which gave those who had not yet packed their furcas and were not in the same state of readiness as their comrades a chance to catch up. There were always a number of these last-minute soldiers in every unit, cohort, century and in every single legion in the Roman army. Even now, some of these men still procrastinated stubbornly until their Decanii stuck their heads through the flaps of their tents to bellow at them.

It came as no surprise to the seasoned soldiers in this camp that these last few hours had flown by, and as the western sky was smeared now with an ominous blood red, the small sounds of this encampment became a little more regular and a little louder as men fidgeted and rechecked the kit in their furcas and on their belts. Centurions and optios alike kept an eye on the two great flaps to Caesar's last remaining tent in the near abandoned centre of this headquarters sector, and as the moon rose gradually into the night sky to join the awakening stars above them, their tension crept steadily upwards with it. The huge canvas pavilions which had stood centrally these months in Fortress Bonon had vanished, having

been packed up and stowed in one of the huge ships of this awaiting armada. Alone and in a vast square of dead and yellowed grass, this large viewing tent remained and would stand for the garrison officers. Inside it, the fine sand remaining in the almost empty top half of the hourglass on Caesar's old campaign desk vanished inexorably through its miniature sinkhole.

Everyone was surprised when the buccinators and cornii who had sounded the start of the third watch just a short time ago once again colluded to play their practised declaration of arrival for their general, and which flamboyant musical embellishment presaged the opening of those great triangular wedges of goatskin. It was watched by all as two slaves emerged to tie back the flaps on this now isolated looking tent before melting quickly away. There arrayed within were the elites and officers of Caesar's staff, all standing proudly around the general in this bare tent. The horns played an upward sweep again as Caesar stepped out with a flourish, and his legions roared in greeting. The general beamed at this almost deafening reception, and he stepped forwards to mount the small, raised platform which had been set out for him to address his men, and as they bellowed out his name: "Caesar! Caesar! Caesar!" He allowed them to continue for a few moments before he held up his hand, and slowly order was restored, and thousands of bright, excited eyes held him in their gaze.

"Valiant soldiers of Rome!" He opened loudly, sweeping his eyes across these serried ranks of men standing before him under this bold moonlight, even turning to brush his gaze over the auxiliaries at the rear. "*My* valiant soldiers!" He roared. "Here we stand together on the eve of our greatest adventure yet, and I know many will have heard the stories about the raucous clamouring of moneylenders and power-hungry politicians back in Rome. Small men! Grocers and bean-counters; mere tradesmen who would seek to rob us of our glory and this chance to make our fame and our fortunes!" He told them, keeping the power in his voice so that his words would carry to the furthest ranks. A low grumble arose from these

soldiers at his words, and which pleased him as he gauged the mood of these garrulous men. He nodded, smiling at these rogues who had followed him for so many hundreds of foreign miles. "It is easy to condemn others for seeking fame and fortune when your own are secure, and mark my words, it is this envy which drives them to recall us in shame. But I will not play their game gentlemen, as I am compelled to offer you, my loyal soldiers this opportunity! You deserve this opportunity! You have all earned it by your sweat and your blood, your courage and your loyalty, to me! Not forgetting the hundreds of miles that you have marched with me in the service of and to the glory of Rome! I will not let them take that same glory from you!" He shouted at them now, raising his fist, and his soldiers responded with a loud shout of their own, which rebounded around the hard walls of this fortress in waves. "And I am entirely committed now to our *overseas excursion!*" He added with a grin once the noise had died down, and thousands of soldiers laughed at this description, even those who did not know why they were laughing. It was completely infectious and had the effect of releasing the tension in these men. "That is of course if you want to explore Prittania and relieve it of a great deal of its wealth?" He asked them with a tilt to his head, and the response was booming as they roared their assent in complete unison, echoing around these walls. Caesar laughed then, knowing he had them in the palm of his hand, and every man here knew it too. "Oh, so you *do* want to go and kill some barbarian, long haired Prittans?" He challenged them, and his soldiers knew the routine by now and roared their affirmation back to much laughter and elbowing. "I, your commander, my two hunting hounds and my esteemed corps of officers are travelling to Prittania tonight for some long overdue and much-deserved sport, and with a large and extremely competent cavalry of equites in support. Will you come with us?" He asked them, and although the question was entirely fatuous, his invitation was accepted nonetheless and by a huge wall of noise as these men howled their desire to do just that. "I can't quite hear you!" He shouted back, and the response was once again almost deafening, making him smile like a shark. Caesar's smile vanished

then, and a more serious expression settled on his rugged features. He drew his fabulous gladius and thrust it at them, goading and clearly challenging them. The general pointed his gladius now at each cohort in its block, and as if he were talking directly to each man. "We will storm their harbour like the dark demons of Dis itself before they even know we have arrived, and their bodies will be piled up like driftwood!" He roared at them now, his face darkening. The jocularities stopped in the ranks as these men looked up at their general in awe. "We will cut them down like ripe corn and we will enslave their women and take their gold!" He yelled at them, his eyes blazing. These soldiers roared again but now with an atavistic fury, and two of his *primus pilli* began to pound their chest plates with their right fists in salute. In moments every soldier in this camp took up the salutation, and Fortress Bonon resounded to the echoing crash of clenched flesh on steel. After many long and pleasurable moments Caesar held up his left hand, his eyes glittering as he called for order once more, and the silence was almost immediate, the men becoming still again.

"Our Flamen Quirinalis and his priests have done their good works, and so we march purified under our Gods' protections and with the blessings of Mars, Jupiter and Fortuna. We will destroy their barbarian priests as well as their filthy warriors, and we will piss on their foreign Gods!" He spat out. "But gold and glory are not our only motivations for this campaign, for as all here know Prittanian mercenaries have been killing our soldiers over here for years! We have all lost friends in this flea-bitten continent to Prittanian steel and have been forced to bury them here, never to return home." He said solemnly, seeing the effect his words had on these now animated men. "I don't know about you men, but I for one want revenge for my fallen comrades!" He growled at them, brandishing his Gladius again at them, century by century. "Do you want to avenge your fallen brothers?" He roared again at them now, challenging his soldiers, and they began to thump their chest plates again and bellow their assent back at him. Caesar looked flushed but happy, and he nodded at these monstrous killers of his, catching the eye here and there of familiar faces and taking the time to smile, recognising each veteran who had fought

alongside him. When he judged the time to be right, he resumed his upright position and did not need to call for order as these men were tuned in to him now and fell silent intuitively, their eyes glued to his chiselled face. Caesar held his dazzling gladius high and with his eyes blazing once more. "Tonight, my brave and loyal warriors, we sail for Prittania, vengeance and for glory!" He boomed at them in finality, and the air was rent with their yelled response, completely drowning out the faint bleating of goats beyond the eastern gate.

It was almost an hour later when these legionaries and their auxiliaries were finally formed up and ready to march from Fortress Bonon, for perhaps the last time, and the mounted vanguard of equites had assembled around their leader under the stars. A little after midnight, recorded by his scribes as 'media noctis inclinatio' on the 23rd day of Quintillus in the year 699 and under a bright, portentous moon, General Gaius Julius Caesar led his army out through the main gates of this fortress. On his white stallion and flanked by his monstrous German hounds, they wheeled left, to march the short journey west to their Portus Itius. This shining silver and crimson machine assembled here by General Caesar marched down to his harbour in magnificent mechanical glory with its standards held high, its drums banging and the cornii of its buccinators blaring to the starlit heavens. All his preparations were complete, the prayers and supplications to their Gods had been performed and the stiff westerly trade wind was now also favourable. The general's confidence soared as he led these two glittering legions down toward the harbour and to all their fates. The few locals abroad at this hour had melted away at this foreboding sight, escaping into the surrounding forests like fearful ghosts. Caesar, on his stunning white charger had entered Portus Itius like a conquering king, and he assembled his staff on the high banking overlooking the harbour to watch his foot soldiers embark in silence and in an accurate, much-practised order below him. However, his troubled eyes were immediately shrouded with concern as he surveyed the empty channel beyond the shelter of this harbour. The cavalry fleet should have been holding station at the mouth to this huge harbour, but all he could

see out there was empty, moving and lumpen ocean. His soaring confidence had fallen with a bump, and now his eyes returned frequently to the furthest point of land east and to the dark shadow of that beaked promontory in the moonlit distance which lay between him and Portus Ulterior. Caesar desperately sought sight of his cavalry fleet and the twinkling light of their mast lanterns in the gloom in that direction but saw nothing but heaving black-grey sea. His earlier concerns for Longinus' fleet at the final council before they broke camp had been rudely confirmed, as it became clear that the cavalry fleet had encountered a serious problem. Regardless of the army of engineer immunes that had swarmed over the remaining ships in Mamurra's Fabrum to get them finished, seven of those recently completed transports, although rigged and declared ready by Mamurra had not yet undergone any sort of trial to determine their seaworthiness but had been commissioned by Caesar, nonetheless. Caesar had taken another considered gamble here, but now he was really concerned, as there was no sight of these eighteen vital transports in the channel, holding station as expected and awaiting their turn to dock and to embark the nearly four thousand men and horses gathered behind him in waiting. He had been about to send riders eastwards up the coast to discover what had happened to his ships when he was forestalled by the arrival of a dispatch rider of the 10th, who galloped into the port in a cloud of sandy dust. He informed a centurion with a smart salute that the larger ships of the cavalry fleet had been prevented from holding their station in the channel here, as even with no sail and drag anchors deployed, this strengthening westerly had pushed against the high timber sides of their empty ships. They had been forced back east by this building wind, to where they were able to drop a proper anchor and find secure, shallower mooring once more in Portus Ulterior, a birthplace where many of those ships had been compelled to return. This wind, whilst an impediment to sailing west into its teeth and to assembling as required here, it should be a boon to them once all were embarked, as their route was east and north. This steady trade wind should take them all the way across this channel and hopefully precisely

to where they planned to go. More than half the infantry fleet were already embarked, loaded up and heading stubbornly out toward the harbour entrance as Caesar was absorbing this information, calculating the ramifications furiously. He was gathering his thoughts when Titus Labenius on his black stallion called the other officers around Caesar to quickly discuss this latest turn in events. Concern showed clearly on all these well-groomed, olive-skinned faces, and whilst it was not one of the feared channel storms which advanced on them, this strong yet favourable wind would not abate and seemed to have strengthened in the last hour, scuppering the embarkation plans for the cavalry. Following a quick mounted discussion, it was determined that the main fleet could broach this wind simply enough and head east as intended before northing and easting again as planned, but Quaestor Longinus' cavalry vessels would now have to be embarked at the clearly inferior Portus Ulterior. Labienus gave hasty orders to his Quaestor that the cavalry should mount up immediately and head the seven miles back down the coast to Traith Gwîn, where they would need to board their vessels from the ramps on the heavily littered beach there. Whilst undoubtedly the 10th would miss this tide and divide their invasion force, this will allow Longinus' cavalry to embark somehow from that beach at least and to launch their fleet at first high tide tomorrow, before then joining Caesar whenever and wherever possible somewhere out on that grey and featureless channel. It was far from ideal, but Caesar had little alternative, and so he spat to the ground before giving the go ahead with a scowl. Mamurra volunteered to oversee the tricky beach embarkation of the cavalry, but Caesar declined the offer, choosing to keep this experienced and inventive officer with him as he had taken enough chances for one week. Speaking quickly to his officers, Caesar told them to pass down to their centurions the need to keep up morale at this unfortunate turn of events, and to reassure all their troops that the cavalry will re-join them as soon as they are able.

Inside half an hour, Longinus and the cavalry had set out for their return to the fortress, followed by two cohorts of soldiers. Caesar and his officers

had boarded their biremes, all the foot soldiers of his 7th and 10th Legions were finally aboard their own transports, and at least the infantry; the *cohors militaire* of this invasion force sailed out of Portus Itius as planned to face the choppy grey waters ahead. Longinus and his cavalry had charged off east, down the familiar drover's road and heading back to Fortress Bonon being followed by the 9th and 10th cohorts of Legio VII. They had been relegated to make room for cavalry equipment on the ships that had already sailed, and which hitherto had been destined for infantry. Eleven hundred cavalymen of Caesar's own Legio X *Equestris* had also been relegated to reserve status due to the lack of finished transports. Taking charge as expected, these equites had supervised as the miles gregarii, the probatios, tirones and the slaves loaded the wagons with all the abandoned equipment. Within the hour they had trundled off in line heading west, returning to the now surprisingly busy fortress in the dusty wake of their cavalry. Leaving the glum and redundant reserve troops behind, Longinus and his chosen men had thundered out of the fortress an hour later and headed east to Traith Gwîn, where their ships and the uncertain task of boarding from a beach awaited them. On arrival, these men began to clear and secure Traith Gwîn, throwing up a huge temporary corral for their horses. They then made a beach camp for this warm summer night, anticipating a busy day tomorrow, as the tide had turned and there would be no sailing tonight for any of them.

The general's total invasion force embarked numbered eight cohorts of Legio VII, totalling four thousand eight hundred troops. These were supported by one thousand eight hundred Macedonian auxiliaries in four cohorts, totalling six thousand six hundred men. The 10th Legion's contribution to the holds of these eighty infantry ships were *cohors militaire* one to four, reflecting two thousand four hundred miles gregarii, supported by three cohorts of fifteen hundred diverse auxiliary troops from Batavia, the Balearic Isles, Numidia and Crete. This made a total of three thousand five hundred infantrymen from the glorious tenth, and every ship was packed to the gunnels with these armed invasion troops.

Including Caesar, his staff and all the peripheral additions necessary to this fighting army, the total invasion force which sailed out of Portus Itius this night was not the fourteen thousand-strong army he had hoped for. It now numbered a little over ten and a half thousand Romans, clinging to wet timbers and praying to their Gods, but more crucially, his invasion force as yet had no cavalry.

As this diverse fleet of ships reached the unsheltered expanse of ocean beyond the mouth of Portus Itius, a blustery squall snapped their sails full and taut, and these enormous ships heeled with it, heading eastward. Their captains tacked them northeast across this wild wind and toward the rising grey heart of this feared waterway, ploughing through an eerie phosphorescence which sprayed its luminous green glow over the bows of these ships, to unnerve all the tirones and probatios clinging to them. It glared spookily on the wet timbers and across the dark, rising surface of this unfamiliar sea, and no one knew if it was a good omen or a dire warning. The black velvet sky above gave them no clue, but it was littered with a billion carelessly thrown stars, and they stared and winked down on them with a cold disinterest from their bottomless mantle. The hulls and reaching masts of the relegated ships of the cavalry crowding Portus Ulterior and those on the sands behind them could just be made out through the misty gloom, looking like a fleet of distant ghost ships in that shallow beachside harbour. As they steered away from the coast and their frustrated cavalry toward the darkening north, the confidence of these pioneering Romans was left un-bolstered by the scratching of their officers' heads. Their morale was also undermined by the pointing out of different northerly directions by their captains as this conjectured route was explored, but they ploughed on into the heaving grey-green hills of this white and eerily phosphor tinted sea undaunted.

An hour later, the unnerving phosphorescent glare had vanished as quickly as it had arrived, and a senior centurion was doing the rounds with a wide stance in one of these biremes. This muscular man was moving carefully from one bracing handhold to the next as he negotiated the wet

and slippery, bucking timbers under him to talk to each pale and huddled group of men. Recognising an extended group of his battle comrades, made up of the junior officers of both legions and who were clearly sticking together, he nodded to this group of men and squatted by them, spitting into the bilges among the ballast stones.

“We’ll have to watch each other’s backs in the days ahead lads.” He told them this with a dour nod, and these dour men looked back at him with hardening faces and attitudes as they too clung to these heaving timbers. “This action in Pritania will not follow any training procedure I can promise you, so we’re going to have to keep our wits about us when we get there, if we ever fucking get there!” He cursed quietly and spat into the streaming bilges once more. “But fear not, for we are officers in the glorious Roman army, and it is for others to fear us in these fateful hours.” This centurion rumbled sarcastically, patting the nearest young tribune on his shoulder. “Stick to your battle brothers, follow your orders and always keep one eye on your centurion.” He advised him, before passing on between the men, teetering as this heavy ship heeled violently under him again and as the cold sea crashed over the sides to soak everything and everyone once more. The oarsmen rowed for their lives and others started bailing furiously again with their leather buckets, trying desperately to keep the sea where it belonged; on the outside. This fleet trudged onwards, more in hope than confident navigation, and it was evident on every pale face in it. On through the heaving sea it sailed, heavily and ponderously, and lashed as it was by these wind-blown and freezing waves, this journey seemed to go on forever. The low and severely laden bows of these ships rose and fell endlessly into these dark and heaving swells, each time causing explosions of white spume around their prows to cascade backwards over all within, soaking everyone again before seething loudly back through the open scuppers at the stern and as these huge ships dragged themselves upright once again. Many soldiers had thrown up their guts, their morale and their energy from this soaking and the constant pitching and yawing, and they lay pale and vomit-streaked now in the stinking and swilling bilges. Many hours of this interminable,

undulating torture these men had to endure, sailing north-east and then northwest, until finally, every man felt a change in the vast green tumult beneath them and the waves begin to change in both force and tempo. One or two brilliant white herring gulls appeared in the wind tossed skies above them, battling this persisting westerly joyfully on their canted wings, lifting all their spirits and confirming that land could not be too far away. A weak and diffused sunrise to their right gave sight to nothing but humping grey, turbulent sea in all directions, but its appearance was welcome, not just for its sight giving light but also as it confirmed their continued northerly direction into the unknown.

When the high lookout on Caesar's flagship eventually spotted land, it surprised every soul aboard these ships. This man called out loudly from his mast, pointing excitedly to the north and he got everyone's instant attention. Nobody else could see anything for long moments, but like a hazy smear on the horizon, land appeared. No one knew for sure what country they had raised, but it lifted their spirits immensely as many of the sixty-two ships in this fleet had suffered damage in these high winds, from torn sails to stripped rigging and so all aboard were relieved to see solid ground whomever it belonged to. The wind dropped a little as they swung toward this looming land ahead, causing the waves to ease somewhat at the bows, and it was a relief to stop tacking and to have more horizontal decking again. As they drew further in toward this growing shoreline ahead, they saw first the high, startlingly white and sheer cliffs as previously described by his military tribune Volusenus, and Caesar gained confirmation at least that they had crossed the infamously perilous waters of this foreign channel virtually unscathed. Somehow, they had navigated themselves from the known world into the unknown, and apart from some widespread but largely minor damage to spars and rigging, they now faced the legendary shores of mysterious Prittania. Thousands of wide eyes peered over high timber gunwales to take in this rare sight, the word 'Prittania!' on everyone's lips, and without exception spoken with a measure of awe. The vivid green fields above those undulating and oyster-white cliffs blocking the horizon from east to west

now were covered in a moving mass, and which looked like a swarming colony of tiny ants from this distance. It became clear as they drew closer to this high, imperious and swooping bulwark of chalk that its grassy covering blanket was in fact bristling with menacing looking Prittanic warriors, charioteers and horsemen, as the sun glinted off uncountable moving weapons and armour. It was obvious to Caesar and his officers as they drew within ballista range of these impressive cliffs that there was no place to land here, as the shore was tight to the face of those high and riven walls of chalk. If they approached too closely, they would be subjected to a veritable avalanche of rocks, spears and all manner of other dangerous objects from the enraged Prittans above. Many historians at home had assured Caesar that those people shared his own blood, in that Brutus himself had come here centuries ago to settle a countrywide civil war, and that these wild barbarians were his descendants. That great man had thrown down roots here according to this myth, and he had become this country's high king almost half a millennia ago. This fable would have it that those were his people amassed on those cliffs, and it was just preposterous. Caesar's own Patrician family claimed descent from Aeneas the founder of Alba Longa, and whose son Ascanius had also been familiarly called *Julius*. His noble predecessor Ascanius-Julius was grandfather to the Brutus thought to have seeded these wild looking people, and it made no sense to him. He had not believed any of it, knowing that it would be him that would be given the credit when he brings this country under his heel, not some myth. He had seen a colossal statue of Brutus in Ravenna as a younger man, and it had been a larger-than-life tableau of Brutus riding a two-horse chariot with great verve. Like a conjured image from a boyhood history lesson, identical and fabulously decorated two-horse war chariots, unlike anything they used in Rome were charging recklessly about those clifftops, each lightweight vehicle drawn by a pair of matched horses and raising clouds of dust. This was indeed a truly ancient and untouched world he had discovered whether Brutus had been here first or not, but even from this distance it was plain that their arrival was expected this day, and it was plain too that those

Prittans had not assembled in friendly welcome. Caesar stayed clear, pushing on with the fleet, and they tacked again now, sailing further east toward the mouth of the harbour his military tribune had mentioned and the yet unconfirmed target of this invasion.

Caesar saw no sight of any harbour as they sailed east toward the gaping maw of an estuary ahead and to their left hand, its great fan of brown, fresh water clearly different to the briny stuff it joined. This broad and fast flowing, muddy tribute roiled into the ocean, keeping itself separate in great swirls which even surfaced far into the channel like enormous brown and liquid whales, their backs just breaking the surface. The general looked up this great chasm carved from the high white walls by its river over eons, and now as they crossed its mouth he could see they were equally threatened by the warriors on those tall and sheer cliffs to both sides as many Prittanic warriors had crowded both banks of the foreshore which outflowed there. As his bireme bucked in this stained and turbulent confluence, he spotted the harbour roughly half a mile upstream, and to attempt to reach it would be like running the gauntlet. To brave that estuary, Caesar doubted if even one of his ships could survive the journey through the gorge, up that broad river and to those distant bankside wharves. He ordered his captains to sheer away from the muddy mouth of this estuary and to sail further east, to pass around the small and craggy foreland just visible ahead and on the hearsay advice of Volusenus, as they hoped to find a larger and much more accessible tribal port or harbour in the waters beyond it. There was no pause to the moving mass of vehicles, people and horses which shadowed their progress on the shore to their left. The Prittans would vanish as they negotiated great clefts in these cliffs or other unseen obstructions, but they would reappear again soon enough, and they followed this fleet east relentlessly, screaming and gesticulating wildly down at them. The sides of all these ships were thronged with soldiers now they were close enough to see more detail, and they could see that some of Prittania's warriors had their hair fixed rigidly upright into white spikes to make them look fiercer perhaps, and many seemed to be heavily tattooed with blue swirling

patterns. They were dressed in a mixture of animal skins and plaid trews, with a smattering of armour or chain mail glinting here and there over which they had thrown long plaid shawls. However, these Romans were surprised to see among that unformed and undisciplined mob a large number of female warriors. These women looked equally ferocious and unwelcoming, and many of them drove their own chariots with a great and ostentatious skill, clattering along those cliff tops in expert and furious challenge. Other, wilder women were dressed in black rags and would run among the rows of their spearmen, pulling at their own startling, black and dishevelled hair, gesticulating wildly and screeching at these ships. Many of these Roman soldiers laughed at them as they sailed past, pointing out one rare sight after another to each other. Two tense hours of parallel pursuit later and in a blustery afternoon they had cleared the broad and rounded isthmus to sail into a wide bay, but they still had not found a main port or a harbour to attack. A much larger promontory had been revealed ahead of them as they entered this bay and they pressed on toward it, confident that they were about to discover the harbour they so eagerly sought behind that southerly reaching isthmus. As they forged through the choppy waters and across this wide bay toward it, the bow waves created by the leading ships began to rear up and to crash over their prows, as it now seems that the tide has turned against them. Pressing down on his rising frustration, Caesar ordered his captains to push on and to cross this broad but useless bay they had discovered, and to sail for the substantial headland in the distance and at the furthest end of this bay. He took the time to reprove Volusenus on his timidity during his earlier reconnaissance, pointing out the obvious unsuitability of that river harbour they had sailed past. The officer blushed furiously but kept his silence.

There seemed to be a tidal surge building against them now and which held them, and they made very little forward progress due to these quickly changing conditions. The captains were forced to battle deceptive undercurrents and submerged rocks, with sharp eyed sailors clinging to the spume drenched bows to call them out. The wind too was now veering

and growing against them and forcing them to tack against it, an extremely dangerous procedure so close to a lee shore. The captains had to sheer away against their general's wishes to allow them the room to manoeuvre, and with so many ships crowding this bay, it was becoming increasingly dangerous. They were in constant sight of this long stretch of impractical but flat pebbled shore to their left however, but all knew it was unfeasible as it had long ago been established by the Roman military, that to secure a beach landing with your infantry you must first clear the land around it with your cavalry. At this point in time, which at a guess was hours away from the next change in tide and which irritatingly no one seemed to know when exactly that might be, there was no cavalry in sight. This beach to the fleet's left was a little more than a hundred and fifty yards deep, but it ran almost the full length of this curving bay and for over a mile. It was in sight constantly as they tried to battle east toward that huge and distant peninsula ahead of them, but the tidal surge was now firmly against them, and as much as the captains tacked and struggled, they could not make the headway needed to sail anywhere near to this headland ahead let alone make the unseen lands beyond it. They found it impossible to make any gains on Volusenus' previous recce, and Caesar's anger was rising visibly as he was thwarted by the unfavourably changing sea beneath him and the swirling, unpredictable winds around him. The rear echelons of this huge fleet of ships were still attempting to enter this shallow bay and it was becoming chaotic, the frantic shouts of sailors carrying clear across this bay from the rear along with their ribald curses and their ripe language. Caesar refused to look again at Volusenus, who wisely kept his silence from his position under the foredeck. The general looked to his right then and back the way he had come, looking longingly for any sign of Quintus Longinus and his cavalry. Nothing marred the perfect rule of that horizon, and he tried to spit his frustration over the side but failed miserably, as this unruly wind whipped his sputum back at him to slime his breastplate and to wet his best toga. His face hardened then, and his neck suffused dangerously with blood as the famous 'Caesar' temper flared bright within him. With a

familiar scowl, he looked again at that long beach to his left, pinching the bridge of his nose against the pulse of a threatening headache. That long beach of large, cobble sized pebbles was at least unthreatened by any close and looming cliffs, and the Prittans had clearly been forced around the valley of a river outlet, cut deeply into the rock above it. On closer observation, there was a densely wooded ridge behind that beach, and most of the enemy seemed to be backed up on the high cliffs to the left and above it. More chariots and horsemen appeared then on the grassland upon the high cliffs to the right and the eastern terminus of that long beach, but they were no threat to it as its sides were sheer and there was no access from it down to that beach. Caesar's officers had advised dropping anchor in this bay to make some much-needed repairs and to wait for more favourable conditions, and with any luck Longinus and his mounted equites. Prudence also advised that he withdrew and tried to make a more north-easterly headway further out in the channel, or to hold station until the tide turned once more. This shallow bay was already congested, and if a storm swept in now before his fleet was secured, it could end in unmitigated disaster. Dark clouds were gathering in the west even now, and Caesar did not trust this unfamiliar climate, fearing being mauled by a storm before he could even land his troops more than anything at that disquieting moment. Looking back at his ships lifting and falling in this cramped bay behind him, and so close together they were virtually cheek-by-jowl now, this gut-gnawing, dread feeling finally got the better of him and brought forth the impulsive, risk-taking streak he was known for. Regardless of that beach's obvious unsuitability, Caesar made a snap decision. He barked an order to his shocked captain to turn inland, and he declared sternly to his officers that they would make an impromptu landing on those wet pebbles regardless. Once more Caesar called on the blessings of both Fortuna and Mercury to aid him and to help him make a successful beachhead there, however inappropriate his choice of landing, and he gripped the rail now with white knuckles as he watched his orders being carried out.

The Prittans had moved along the coastal fringes, always keeping a belated pace with the fleet, but they had been forced inland to negotiate the small river at the western end of this bay and which found the ocean at that pebble beach. This beach at least offered them a landing which was not so overlooked and so open to a potential rain of deadly missiles as those cliffs had been. The high and thickly wooded ridgeline which overlooked and protected this long and broad beach was set well back, and it was topped with fractured and rocky ground where no great force could gather, and it was well out of spear range of the surf line. The beach was protected too to the east by the high and sheer cliffs of the headland to their right, and where at its feet the pebble beach petered out as this bay curved outwards again. As they got nearer, Caesar could see that the western approaches to this beach and the ground around the outflow of that small river were restricted and could not be flooded suddenly with thousands of warriors. It would take some time to assemble an army on that narrow end of the beach to face him, and a small one at that. He felt somewhat reassured at this quick assessment, in that they could at least make a landing there, and he directed his captains to tack into this shallow bay and to drop anchor there.

As dozens of heavy anchors plunged into the sea to keep these ships on station, deeply disturbing orders were circulated throughout the fleet. They were met with disbelief initially, but the murderous look on their officers' faces told these soldiers in no uncertain terms that their orders were indeed valid. They were not anchoring to await more favourable conditions as every soldier here had assumed, they were ordered to disembark! Incredibly, they were to disembark in the same order they had embarked in, and eight ships were tasked to form the vanguard. One group of eight at a time, they would approach the shore for the men to evacuate their ships as best they could and to form their beachhead on those pebbles before the sea conditions worsened and before they were all swamped by a possible storm. The disbelief among the legionaries gave way to a low, fear-filled rumbling, especially around the officers assembling these troops at the gunwales of the first eight ships and as

that utterly unsuitable beach began to rush toward them. As these first eight transports eased into the shallows with their prows crowded with soldiers, they stopped well short of the low surf line, which slapped the wet pebbles loudly now in the most ancient of rhythms. It became clear to them soon enough however that this landing was far from ideal, and that 'disembarkation' bore no relation to what was clearly demanded here of them by their general. He was ordering them to do nothing short of 'jump ship!' Many soldiers balked at this decidedly unmilitary decant, as the high gunwales made clambering over them tricky, and the drop looked daunting. However, their biggest fear by far was the depth of foreign water awaiting them, as it was not easy to judge. Added to this was the fact they were carrying almost sixty pounds of kit and equipment each, and if the water was just a few inches too deep they would be in dire trouble. It seemed even more precarious to the many soldiers at the rails who could not swim, and fear flitted through these men like a spiteful ghost, unnerving these seasoned men, and their eyes grew along with their mounting fears as this foreign and highly unlikely beach drew nearer.

A dozen or so enemy chariots drove down to the beach at the approach of these eight ships, descending slowly from the western cliffs and down alongside that river valley in single file. They made their way down through steep and treacherous, convoluted sheep and animal tracks leading down to the beach with consummate horsemanship. The pebbles had flown from their wheels and their horses' hooves when they finally charged along that shoreline, the rear mounted warriors hopelessly loosing off spears at these eight ships before they turned and ground their way back, all their missiles falling well short. These chariots soon withdrew however, as they found the deep and shifting pebbles unsuitable to the horses and to the narrow wheels of the vehicles they towed behind them. There were rows of foot soldiers with colourful round shields and tall spears coming down those steep trails two abreast, and some of their forward elements had congregated at the bottom by the river, no doubt to await further orders. The bold and flamboyant charioteers attempted to withdraw and charge back up that hill, just as the hastily arriving

spearman tried to clamber down the same pathways to join their comrades. Without warning it lurched into chaos, and these Romans watched in amazed silence as a brawl broke out between those two factions. The Prittans began to set about each other with a deadly intent on those rutted slopes and with a great and clamorous uproar. These invaders could clearly hear the clash of metal weapons and a great shouting and yelling from their positions at these ships' sides, although not one word made any sense to any of them. Those quarrelling Prittans caused a great deal of amusement on these ships, but then these Romans saw a huge warrior in a shining helmet and a black fur cloak, roaring and gesticulating at those combatants from the top of that hill. He was clearly yelling at his madly fighting people, and his indecipherable bellowing seemed to have an effect, as slowly, all hostilities ended. The descending spearman parted begrudgingly, and the paired horses galloped up that track riven hillside between them, dragging with them the gaudily decorated vehicles and their equally gaudy and garrulous occupants. At the foot of that hill, an amorphous mass of barbarians had condensed slowly on the left of that beach. As the first of these ships arrived in place, the high skyline to east and west filled with enemy warriors, and another large group of Prittanic troops descended the central slopes to this beach to join their comrades on those wet pebbles. This slowly building force around the mouth of that little valley began to coalesce and to take shape around that stream which found the shore there. Spreading out from the base of that cleft hill to one side of its valley and the modest estuary of its outflow, those Prittanic warriors had formed up and were beginning to fill the far end of that beach now, and the crashing of their spears against their round shields carried clear across the water to these Romans.

The legionaries on these first eight ships were now faced with their terror. They had been ordered to jump into an unknown depth of water from these high gunwales and to then swim or wade to land, burdened with weapons and gear whilst those incensed locals threw javelins and slung rocks at them. The centurions were roaring at the tardy libritor immunes to release the transit strapping from the scorpion and the bestia of the

one *heavy* among these first eight ships, and to get some five pounders and darts flying into the rank upon rank of barbarian warriors now forming up on that beach. Despite the centurions' bawling and the optios' goading to disembark, it was not an agreeable prospect. In fact, to many it looked like suicide, and the soldiers hung back, their forearms locked stiff to the timber rails. None would take the plunge, and it looked like an impasse, one of pure fear. No one moved, and the seconds seemed to stretch into minutes as the palpable tension mounted on these eight ships and as the crashing of arms and the raucous yelling from the beach swelled in harsh invitation. Two of these stiff-armed soldiers were moved rudely aside and by the broad shouldered and battle scarred aquilifer of the tenth, who looked over the rail at those distant Prittans with a contemptuous scowl.

"Gerrae!" He roared at the men around him, hefting his sacred banner on its stout pole. "Do you want to live forever, you lily-livered tunic lifters?" He challenged them loudly, and with his hard face suffusing darkly, he clambered over the gunwale.

Without another word, that courageous aquilifer jumped into the sea with an enormous splash. All his comrades were agog, and the timber rail was instantly packed with men leaning over and looking down with wide eyes, watching in amazement as the eagle and the man both disappeared with a great splash and an explosion of spume. In a moment, his standard and then his head and shoulders broke the surface again, and that soaked but enraged soldier shook the water from his head and roared again, beginning to forge his way through the heaving waves toward that beach and furiously brandishing his eagle. The water was only chest deep, and it calmed the watching men especially those who could not swim, and their rigid arms relaxed somewhat.

"Will you watch him go alone?" A senior optio yelled in fury at these stunned men, pushing through them himself, and this incensed officer began to climb the wooden rail. "Defend the eagle!" He roared the order at them and leapt off the ship.

The spell was broken in an instant, and their training kicked in. Galvanised, these soldiers flew to the ship's sides, to clamber over the heavy timber gunwales in pursuit of their valiant comrades and their sacred eagle, and all eight ships were suddenly swarming with climbing and dropping soldiers. They had all been inspired by their aquilifer's unselfish and extraordinary bravery, and that uncommon man whose feet were the first to feel Prittanic land was the spark to Caesar's explosive invasion and for his pioneering courage would be remembered and honoured forever. Dozens of soldiers now splashed into the shallows from the bow rails and gunwales of these huge ships and began wading through the waves toward the shore ahead of them. They ploughed onward, but under a hail of smooth river pebbles from newly arrived but accurate Prittanic slingers, and men began to fall. More and more soldiers began to climb over the high sides of these ships with their shields raised, still in their protective leather bags and would then drop into the cold water to support the aquilifer, the optio and their growing band of brave pioneers. The soldiers jumping into the sea of this bay became an avalanche, and these bold men held their scutum high as they struggled through the waves in support of their comrades, the waters around them alive and dancing from the incoming enemy shot. Some, the unlucky were struck by whizzing river pebbles as they waded ashore so painfully slowly, and these early casualties sank below the surface without a sound. Archers lined up to face them now on a break in the high ridgeline overlooking this beach, and their accurate, pin sharp arrows killed more of their men before they even gained dry land. With a shriek, they too would vanish into deep red swirls in this cold, foreign sea. Following some savage initial fighting by slingers and archers on both sides, the Romans managed to assemble almost a hundred men on this beach, and these embattled forerunners huddled behind their tall shields as more and more of their men joined them on these shiny wet pebbles. They suffered the loss of more men to accurately thrown javelins in this perilous onset to Caesar's invasion, and these crude wooden spears would come streaking from the front ranks of these Prittanic warriors, where they would

courageously run out from their ranks and across these pebbles, twenty or thirty yards before loosing them. The Roman's stubborn persistence began to pay off however, as under these withering incoming volleys a small beachhead was finally established. Despite this barrage of slingshot, arrows and spears, the foaming surf line was alive with hundreds more emerging legionaries as the other ships in this first echelon of eight steadily disgorged their invasion troops, and finally Caesar's bold invasion of Pritania was underway. These ground-breaking legionaries managed to swell their numbers on land and began to bolster this fledgling beachhead with their shields held over and before them. In this way, they began to consolidate their precarious landing and to protect this growing pioneer force. Now the libritors were finally engaged, these gathering tribesmen were held at bay by accurate ballista fire from the bow of the one *heavy* in these eight disembarking ships. Using their large, oval shields to protect them from the lightweight arrows of these tribesmen and the rain of whizzing pebbles, more and more foot soldiers were added to this stiff leather and timber shield protecting the ever-growing number of men behind it. These invaluable scutum also protected those who were still frantically wading ashore with all their kit. Some arrows and stones inevitably found their marks however, to shrill screams and short-lived gaps in this big, iron rimmed, leather and timber screen. Men fell squirming and bleeding to these wet pebbles or slipped under the surface of the water, and this nerve-shredding, terrifying invasion landing reached a critical point. It was enough however along with the excellence of the libritors to allow the infantry to storm ashore, adding to the width of the curving, two shield tall barrier which was growing larger with each fraught minute. Some clever immunes had brought planks of timber and tools with them, and they began to construct large cross frames and a barricade between them on these shifting pebbles as their men tried to protect them and themselves with their scutum. The sound from the battered shields at the face of this scutum made bulwark and which awaited the men still fighting the clinging surf was like a monstrous hailstorm. The dancing water alongside it and around them was thrashed

with striking shot as they struggled on through these dragging waves. Once all the troops from the lead ships were ashore which amounted to almost six hundred beleaguered and furiously fighting men, their sailors poled the eight barques back out and formed up to sail out of the shallows, and to allow the next eight ships access as they manoeuvred closer to disembark their own troops.

From the bridge of his bireme, Caesar saw immediately that he should have sent at least two *heavies* for the initial landing, and his officers should have had the artillery pieces untethered and ready for service far sooner. More importantly however, he realised that he should have kept the one heavy in the shallows to keep up the vital artillery barrage as the others withdrew. As all eight ships began to move away, he had to bite his tongue to still the order on his lips, as it was no use interfering now. Chaos would surely ensue if he attempted a reverse at this point, and the next shift of ships with their own heavy and its artillery pieces would soon be in place. It was not too late yet to add another heavy to this wave, but Caesar was learning fast, and he never made the same mistake twice. He was passing the order to keep two heavy ships in the next attack, and to have their artillery ready sooner when a low and long tone from a strange and distant horn sounded from somewhere on that hill and from behind those thick ranks of Prittanic warriors. This melancholic sound drifted down to the beach, over the surf and to these ships in the bay, clearly possessing an unknown signal. It seemed as if the Prittans had been awaiting this rotation of his ships, and now free of the murderous artillery they could form up properly and attack. Caesar cursed his oversight as he watched those ranked Prittans march toward his still fragile beachhead unchecked. To the rhythmic stamping of feet on shifting pebbles and to the syncopated crashing of spear shafts on shields, heard clearly across this bay the Prittans marched forwards. The plaid mantled, long haired, tattooed and moustached, aboriginal warriors of Prittania braved the onslaught of Roman slingstones and pili, closing on the leather covered bastion of their beachhead and the men crouching stoically behind it. They marched forwards across those pebbles loudly and with obvious

courage. With a fierce outlook and an undisguised, murderous intent, those Prittans forged ahead, and Caesar's eyes narrowed as he studied their approach. He was astonished when they suddenly stilled the crashing of their spears, and a most delightful and sonorous singing erupted from those barbarian warriors, its harmonic tempo matching the crunching rhythm of their fur clad feet. All the officers around him and every soldier on these ships exchanged looks of complete surprise, as although the lilting words were utterly unknown to them, their harmonised voices were truly beautiful. Their coordinated singing carried clear across this bay, belying their uncivilised outlook completely, and to a man these Romans were amazed. This was indeed a lost and ancient world they had discovered, and Caesar's eyes were wide as the gap between those utterly alien combatant forces and his own shortened inexorably.

More ships had disgorged their fighting men to these wet pebbles, and the barricade had grown larger and denser as the legionaries had poured into it constantly, some replacing the front row of scutum eventually and completely with more sections of timber planking, carried there by those brave immunes. These had been quickly lashed and nailed to what had been already hurriedly established by their fallen comrades, constructing a more solid and substantial blockade, one which was about to be tested. Two cohorts of over a thousand men had assembled in a narrow attack formation behind that timber bastion now, preparing to engage the slowly advancing Prittans, and they readied themselves for combat in this new and outlandish world they had discovered. Whilst the hastily assembled timber barricade and the rows of shields all around it covered the first four or five ranks, the soldiers behind these were forced to shelter under their own raised scutum from the continual downpour of rocks and arrows. Many soldiers were still aboard their transports all around Caesar's flagship in this bay, and they were being rotated onto this shore in shifts, as there just was not room to assemble all the legions and their auxiliaries on this eastern end of this beach. It had been difficult enough to assemble this small force, and as soon as they had formed, they were ordered to clear this beach of that amassing Prittanic rabble. Centurions' whistles

rent the air, and they moved forwards out from the shelter of their beachhead bulwark, and now the second ranks were forced to raise their shields over their comrades in front. In the teeth of this gale of projectiles, the forward ranks courageously pushed on across these heavy, calf-busting pebbles, closing the gap between them and the narrow shield wall of the Prittans approaching. The harmonised singing abruptly stopped to be replaced by an incensed screaming from their enemy, and the great clashing of wooden spears against shields resumed, adding to this maelstrom of incoming sound. The arrows lessened thankfully as the Romans moved across this beach, as a dense stand of wych-elm on the ridgeline blocked most of the enemy archers' views. The weightier javelins the Prittans hurled at them started taking a toll then however, puncturing their leather shields or zipping through a gap in them, to maim or to kill whoever stood behind and in their way. The shipboard libritors were ordered to stand down now from fear of hitting their own men, and the Prittans responded to this pause in their monstrous shot by flooding out of the sheltered river mouth and adding to their numbers, thickening the rear ranks. Taking casualties from this steady bombardment and taking the constant screams of challenge and abuse coming from their nearing enemy, the valiant soldiers of Caesar's legions stepped on to meet these strange and threatening tribesmen. The Macedonian auxiliaries followed them and their officers, and they ground their way forwards, shouting encouragement to each other and filling in the gaps made by their falling comrades. The pebbled space between these two forces closed inexorably, and once they were twenty yards from the Prittans an urgent tone came from a buccinator at the rear, and the Romans charged.

If he ever hoped to land a force large enough to move inland, Caesar knew he would have to drive these primitive barbarians off that foreshore somehow, hoping to force them into flight with just his infantry in this initial assault. Then he could empty the archer and slinger-filled ridgeline above them which had given his men so much torment and had caused so many deaths already. However, the force really suited to such action had not yet arrived. Caesar's eyes narrowed as the Prittans finally charged his

men. The two shield walls met with a jarring concussion, one which could be heard clear across the beach and sounded like part of the cliff collapsing. The sound the pebbles made as they were ground into by so many feet at once then became louder than all other sounds except for the irregular and harrowing screams of the stabbed and injured, who joined their dead comrades and fell squirming to those smooth and round stones.

The two glittering centurions out front fought like *Furions*, screaming their curses at these Prittans as their spears flashed all around them, and one was smashing at the round shields in front of him with his gladius as if he were possessed by Mars himself. His men swarmed to him, hacking the Prittans back who attacked him, giving their centurion more time to consolidate his position, and they surged around their officer, creating an inward bulge in the Prittanic ranks. A great roar came from these men, and they became ferocious with their gains, both in ground and morale. The fighting around these two fearsome centurions was the wildest and bitterest, as Mars' mincer began to churn the flesh of Roman and Prittan alike. These Prittans were barbarous indeed, and they fought like crazed lunatics with little obvious technique and even less tactical awareness, just an all-consuming, blood crazed desire to kill whatever was in front of them. They hacked away at Rome's legionaries with axes, curving sickles and long, leaf shaped swords with all their immense might. It was however the long spears of those enemy spearmen in their 2nd rank which began to tell in this initial battle, as their slender, leaf shaped and razor-edged spear tips would flash forwards between the waists of these barbarians, or between their heads or their hairy legs, and they were completely unpredictable. These long and wickedly steel tipped spears would suddenly appear between any gap, but more so the special void in their wall locked shields which they shoved and grunted behind. These expert, 2nd rank spearmen with their hump backed boar armorials seemed to have a code of guttural utterances which informed the man in front which gap he was going to stab through next. That man would make the small, sudden allowance, and another sharp spear tip would flash forwards with

unavoidable speed and accuracy. Another Roman soldier would then fall, grasping his groin or his chest, wherever the bright blood poured from. He would join his fallen comrades on these hard stones and begin screaming his part in the death song chorus of mortal agony washing over this murderous beach now like a stark warning from all the Gods. A huge, lantern-jawed leader of these barbarians had an enormous, craggy face protruding from under a spectacular helmet, and he led his wild tribesmen from the front. He had a crest of what looked like stiff boar quills mounted along the centre of this big helmet and with a white boar tusk mounted to each cheek piece, both of which caressed his voluminous and drooping moustaches, he made an impressive enemy. This enormous brute of a man stood tall then, easily over six feet, and the sun glinted off his armoured shoulders as he turned to his men and roared at them in his completely indecipherable, lilting language. He brandished a strange, three-sided blade before turning and risking himself terribly to stretch out and to stab one of the Roman centurions suddenly in the neck. The Prittans then surged forwards to support their huge and reckless leader as he regained his balance, and they fought like demons around him in his protection. This centurion of the 7th reeled backwards from this savage blow, clutching at his torn throat which was fountaining blood over his own soldiers, and the chaos was almost complete. Prittanic archers had shifted position now and could bring their exact weapons to bear once more. Flights of these wickedly sharp arrows began to lance into the rear and right flank of these Roman soldiers, and they howled with their fear and their anger. Faced with such an onslaught and by the most expert slingers and archers together, and by the ferocious warriors arrayed in front of them with their unpredictable flashing spears and their strange triple-edged swords, these Romans were faced with no alternative. They retreated. Back along these shifting beach pebbles they marched and backwards, covering themselves with their shields from the continuous volleys of incoming stones and arrows, being forced to execute the *testudo* twice from the sheer volume of shot. Hammered continuously by pebble shot, spear and arrow, these battered Romans retreated to their

beachhead, leaving a trail of bleeding and dying bodies behind them, and those who made it fell panting behind their barrier again, grateful to be alive.

From the prow of his flagship, Caesar watched with a dour expression as his soldiers took cover once more behind the arrow festooned planking of that bulwark and behind their own shields, to recover and to survive their failed attempt at shifting those barbarians. As his ships rotated and more of his men gained land to the right of that bastion, the barrage increased around them, and they were forced to take cover continually from the relentless incoming shot. More and more barbarian warriors were flowing down the hillside of that steep valley to reinforce their battling warriors, and they surged forward now across those noisy pebbles to overwhelm that flimsy little timber bulwark on the beach and to drive the surviving huddle of his pioneering legionaries back into the sea. Caesar scowled as his invasion was now at a terrifying tipping point, and he gripped his miniature golden idol of Fortuna hard and barked out a series of terse orders. This impromptu landing was at an extremely dangerous point, and at this very moment his invasion of Pritania could go either way.

Lessons learned, and at a signal from a buccinator, the naval libritors on both heavies now on station opened up, and five-pound rocks smashed into those advancing Prittanic ranks, killing their celebrations and splintering shields, armour and bone with ease. Another newly arrived *heavy* opened up from the shallows, and the Prittan's onslaught was halted by Caesar's well-practiced and deadly accurate artillery. A slingshot battle then ensued between the Balearic and Prittanic slingers, but the excellence of the libritors from the three heavies now in the bay and the power of their larger and indefensible projectiles began to tell. To the obvious relief of Caesar and all his beleaguered soldiers on that beach, the barbarians were eventually driven back by these monstrous missiles. The large and heavy, steel tipped darts the scorpions fired down from these huge warships in the bay and into the front and right flanks of those Prittanic formations punctured shields and armour with hardly a pause,

some large darts killing two or even three men before their great velocity was arrested. With accurate and fast use of this shield shattering artillery, the libritors on those *heavies* managed to drive the Prittans from their beachhead.

Beaten back and huddled now around that stream and the mouth of its valley, and with thousands of their wild compatriots filling the hillsides above them, those Prittanic warriors refused to leave the body of even one man or woman behind on that beach. A pair would dart out from their lines and churn across these pebbles to grab a fallen warrior, be it man or woman and then drag them away, back to their ranks, dodging slingstones, arrows and huge *buzzing* boulders or monstrous, *whistling* bolts all the way. They took enormous risks to rescue their injured and to reclaim their dead, men and women both, all dodging Rome's best efforts with great courage, but a few less agile or lucky among them were inevitably struck, and those brave people merely added themselves to the sum of that deadly task. The land behind this beach remained filled with howling and chanting Prittanic warriors still, but now they had been forced to withdraw up that riverbed, they were sheltered from Caesar's artillery by the mouth of that small valley. Abruptly this battle was over, but not before several Roman soldiers had been captured in this first, costly attack, mitigated somewhat by the half dozen enemy who had also been taken prisoner in the engagement. Those unfortunates who had evaded capture but had failed to return to that ragged and battered, scutum and timber-built shelter lay in odd numbers and irregular groups now, still and lifeless on the beach where they had fallen. There were no wailing or crying injured among them, as the merciless Prittanic slingers had pelted anything foreign that moved on these pebbles until it made no further sound and until it had become utterly still. Those barbarians had proved themselves to some degree in Caesar's eyes, as not only had they stood, but they had also counter-attacked bravely. Although they looked to have come from a long past era and were no match for his modern-day army, they did seem to enjoy going to war, especially their women. He had seen no fear in any of them, and he knew in his heart they would not scatter

and run as many of the Gaulish tribes had. With no cavalry yet and severely outnumbered by these fierce tribesmen, Caesar knew he could not compel them to leave that beach and its approaches as he wished, especially that cursed ridgeline. He was forced to be content with the small foothold gained thus far, but the general was far from happy about it. He had to be content too with his ability to keep that beach approach clear by punishing any tight formations which approached with his bestia and his scorpions. The superior firepower his artillery posed to the confines of those western approaches held the Prittans back effectively, but their slingers and archers were relentless from behind that wooded ridgeline, blocking his exit from that beach, and it had become a frustrating impasse. Under an inconsistent hail of incoming missiles, the Romans slowly reinforced their beachhead as the sun set and this foreign land became dark around them.

The Romans made watchful camp behind their growing, curving timber bastion and under their scutum in this wild new land they had discovered, whilst their shipboard comrades bedded down in the bay to await their long-overdue cavalry in safety. For now, at least, Caesar was forced to admit a begrudging stalemate. It was obvious to all that their missing cavalry was their greatest problem as it was surely they who were best suited to shifting that rabble. However, their officers were ever positive in attitude, and on reflection, one of the few benefits to this chosen landing location, apart from it being free of dangerous and overhanging cliffs was that the approaches were narrow and would not allow those tribesmen to attack en-masse without having to form up on the western approach to the beach. When they attempted to do so, they laid themselves open to the devastating firepower of Caesar's ship mounted artillery and were soon forced to withdraw up the valley again. Their chariots too fared poorly in the deep pebbles which was another boon, and Caesar's officers were busy in trying to boost morale by sharing the disadvantages of their enemies with their uncertain troops. However, Caesar and all his officers knew that they would be unable to pursue those belligerent Prittans from that beach without his missing cavalry fleet and to turn any first real

success into a rout, let alone clear the ridgeline of hidden archers and slingers. So, they would have little hope of venturing from this pebble filled bay if nothing changed. The great general, his Legate Labienus, Mamurra and all his officers were for the time being constrained to wait and to stare south longingly, back across the channel to the unmarred horizon for Longinus and his missing transports.



Chapter Sixteen.

Over the following days, their lack of mobility meant that they could not even carry out one of the declared main purposes of this mission; that of reconnaissance, whilst hunting and foraging to provide food had become an almost suicidal endeavour. The food and fresh water had been put on strict rationing, controlled by the optios, and many fishing lines could be seen dangling from these dozens of ships in the bay. With his frustration building steadily, Caesar had sent cautious raiding parties out to reconnoitre on foot in the dark hours, to fix the lay of the land around this bay and to locate any crops and nearby sources of fresh water. They could also capture more hostages if the opportunity presented itself, but returning to camp with sustenance was their priority. Two parties of ten, soot blackened men had crept out of the encampment on this crucial endeavour last night, but nothing had been heard or seen from those men since, and it was certain now that they never would. To halt the nerve shredding and continuous daylight bombardment of the beachhead, the Prittanic hostages taken in the first engagement were ruthlessly paraded on the cold pebbles of this beach. Not long after dawn, they were tethered to the face of the battered and arrow studded barricade in obvious fear for their lives. The Prittans immediately ceased their airborne attack, before then sending emissaries to Caesar to offer him an unopposed withdrawal and the release of his own Roman captives along with the disgraced Commios. This would be in exchange for the six captured Brythonic warriors on display along with their leader, who had clearly sustained quite a beating as two of his men had to hold him up. Caesar accepted their offer, releasing these bedraggled barbarian warriors along with their successful emissaries, so that they could trudge across the energy sapping pebbles of their beach and back to their lines. Commios and the Roman prisoners who looked largely untouched were released, and they joined the beachhead behind this battered and arrow-studded timber

barrier, which was becoming wider, taller and stouter every hour of this new day and taking on the form of a small, horseshoe shaped fortlet with one wing stretching out to the nearby shoreline. Caesar agreed to his unopposed withdrawal, promising those barbarians' emissaries that he would leave, but only after his injured men had been treated and when he had made some necessary repairs to his ships. In this way, a ceasefire was agreed. Caesar and Labienus still believed that Longinus and their cavalry could arrive at any hour and may not have been lost or destroyed at sea as all feared. If they did appear, it would change the game completely, and he believed that with almost four thousand professional, mounted and armed equites swelling his ranks he would once again have the upper hand. They could then escape this damned beach and attack these barbarians properly for once and with a far more suitable force. In return for his glib lies, the Pritans had agreed to this period of peace for the treatment of his injured and for the repairs to his ships, lasting no more than three days. They also agreed access to fresh water from the stream in that time. The Pritans had the arrogance to declare that no Roman was allowed off their beach on pain of death, and that when the three days were up, whether or not their soldiers and ships were ready, they would be driven back into the ocean they came from or exterminated where they stood. This threat was not received well by Caesar, but without Longinus' cavalry fleet he was powerless to respond, venting his anger and his mounting frustrations on the pale officers around him. During the exchange, enquiries as to the whereabouts of their absent foraging parties had been met with smiling shrugs of ignorance from the Pritans, but not before a counter-enquiry had been made by a Latin speaker; 'Had the Romans not thought to bring enough food and water?' To raging silence and stony, olive-skinned looks, those Pritans had withdrawn from sight, laughing and jabbering to themselves. The relief from the cessation of incoming missiles however was like a tonic itself to these men, but all eyes constantly returned to stare across the sea with a regular glance in the following hours, as to a man they longed to see the

remission offered by Roman sails appearing over the ruler straight line of that misty, southern horizon.

Every outward foray had failed and had mysteriously vanished, and angered at losing so many small hunting parties, Caesar was forced to contemplate foraging in numbers tonight just for the men's safety. Not being able to use his missing cavalry even once was a biting frustration, but starvation was not an option. With all light and every fire extinguished, Caesar and his officers had managed with great stealth and some luck to assemble parts of the 2nd, 3rd and 4th Cohors of the 7th Legion, totalling almost fifteen hundred legionaries, spread out all along this beach in small groups in the darkness. Two part-cohorts of Macedonian auxiliaries were enjoined, placing another nine hundred men in support of this silently assembling foraging force, making a total of almost two and a half thousand men. They had managed to get off this beach and into the open countryside at around three in the morning on this moonless and cloud covered night. They had been forced to crouch for over half an hour on these noisy pebbles before their night vision had come to the fore and they were able to leave. That operation alone had been fraught with possible dire consequence, but the pressing need to feed themselves was imperative. It had necessitated a great risk, but their escape had gone off as well as could be expected and without any obvious alarm. The procedure had also brought into sharp relief how almost impossible it would be to get all these remaining soldiers off these ships and off this Dis-cursed beach without some other major development or diversion. Caesar needed desperately to get all his troops into some broad space of land, and the big cliff looming to the east with its domed grassy top would be a good place to start. Access to it was only through the unseen Prittanic forces behind this beach and those who may be lying in wait behind them. It was obvious he could not risk his whole army to chance as he had done with that large foraging force when the time came for them all to move, but he did have an iron in the fire in that regard. Caesar longed for open ground, where he could march his army in proper formation and meet whatever was thrown at them as it presented itself,

which is what the Roman army excelled at. The tactical ingenuity required to effectively operate this army at that endeavour was what *he* excelled at, and Caesar chaffed at the bit to discharge his latent but currently shackled powers.

Following a whole day of hunting and collecting what grain they could find or steal and what meagre game they were able to bag, the break free cohorts of the 7th Legion got a little lost on their return and when they ventured into this foreign countryside a little too deeply. Seeing no enemy anywhere, they had been grabbing whatever food they had come across in this empty land and gathering much needed supplies, but with little real success. Although they had returned to this coast simply enough with the aid of the sun and by retracing their steps, they had taken a western route around a familiar hill in error and found themselves approaching their beachhead from a slightly different direction. This large foraging force should have been advised by their long scouts of this, but were not, and so they ploughed on in ignorance. They were but a few miles from their beach when they entered a broad bottomed valley heading for the coast and it was also when they came across the farmstead. Their scouts had been removed from this earth a short time previously, and so these remaining soldiers had unwittingly come across a large expanse of burnt crop stubble without warning. Surrounded by a ring of trees, this large, thatched and clearly abandoned farmstead was adjoined to two burned-out ruins of its once healthy crop fields. It was clear too that the locals had hurriedly gathered their unripe grains before setting this field ablaze to deny them the food. A small stream ran through the heart of this property and this wide valley, and so the destruction of their farm had obviously been done deliberately. They had then destroyed their own home and their outbuildings in the same manner and from sheer spite. The air was still rank with the after smell of a damp fire, and not a single bird or creature moved on this desolate stretch of land or in this whole tree sided valley. There was a pensive hush surrounding this deserted and scorched property, the charred fields around it, the narrow and winding stream running through it and the broad, flat floor of this valley all the way to the

upslope of trees at either side, and not even a bird was tempted to break it. However, in stark and welcome contrast, the field beyond that blackened enclosure ahead glowed with a glorious sunshine yellow. Perhaps these farmers had run out of time it was impossible to tell, but the furthest field beyond the black ruin of the roundhouses in their enclosure in the distance was still filled with a million tall and undamaged stalks of wheat. This huge crop field was bursting with fat and golden wheat, the burgeoning tops of which all glowed like weaving gold in this sunlight. That food rippled enticingly, moving in golden waves with this sullen breeze and it captivated these men.

Empty bellies do rash soldier's make, and these hungry men of the 7th Legion were drawn inexorably to that golden, beckoning wheat like trout to a fly hatch, and they were just as thoughtless in their advance. They were careless in forging toward this huge and bounteous field crop before prudently awaiting the return of their scouts and the all clear, which of course was never coming. Some of these men broke ranks and started to run across this stinking and blackened stubble toward that destroyed enclosure and the golden wheat field beyond it with hopeful faces, each encumbered by a large leather foraging satchel slung around his neck. Their officers chose not to yell out and recall them, as their highly attuned senses were stirring. There was a strange, malevolent atmosphere hanging over this whole place, and not just from the stale and damp stench of burning. They looked around themselves nervously from their saddles, hands creeping towards their swords as they carefully checked the tree lines in their vision, but absolutely nothing stirred, not even a cricket. It was this unnatural, deathly silence and the eerie stillness of this whole valley which worried them the most, but it was already too late. Halfway across this first charred swathe of stubble, the hundreds of hunger blinkered legionaries of the seventh along with two cohorts of their auxiliaries were neatly ambushed. A large Prittanic host had revealed itself abruptly from both treelines, swarming down from the trees under three huge and flowing tribal banners into the floor of this valley west of the stream, where they formed up to block their passage seaward. One

large flag displayed sharp white teeth in the snarling face of an angry brown bear, whilst the central and larger banner alongside it was a broad and T-mounted flag bearing a strange and mystical, long spined boar of outrageous proportions. That hideous boar pennant was flanked by a far more elegant standard of beautiful design, this showing a crowned and rearing white stallion. This large opposing force which had appeared from the trees so suddenly was flanked by dozens of those dangerous, Trojan looking two-man chariots, but these had a snarling brown bear painted on each of the front panels. These speedy, lightweight and modern equivalents swooped down from the trees to both sides of this wide valley, rattling and banging as they took their positions at the wings of this blockading force.

Even at this distance it was clear that there was a solid mass of spearmen in the centre of this host which barred their way, most being long haired brutes of large proportion with long, drooping moustaches and round, gaudily decorated shields. Compared to their own precise and geometrical formations, these Prittanic warriors presented themselves as an indistinguishable, amorphous group of untidy, hairy humanity with round or oval shields and tall spears, all amassed on the broad ground between the hills of this thickly wooded gorge. As they advanced, more and more of their details were revealed, and they held their chariots to their wings as Roman generals hold their cavalry, which it seemed the Prittans had none this day as their equites had obviously chosen to war in vehicles. Any barbarian charioteer who did not want to run over his own men would do the same and form on the flanks, and it required no great reasoning to organise it thus. On closer inspection, there were some clear dissimilarities in their clothing and their shield designs, which obviously denoted the families within these three distinct tribes and illustrated by their three very dissimilar and colourful banners, but they meant nothing to these soldiers. Sections of the long ranks facing them had different coloured chequered cloaks thrown about their shoulders, and even from a distance they could see that some had longer spears than others, also giving some clue as to the diversity within this brutish looking opposing

force. Some, the locals perhaps had their hair comically spiked up with a white paste, no doubt gleaned from the chalk of these high cliffs to make them look fiercer perhaps, whilst the majority did not. What was most obvious, and most unsettling however was that you could see their teeth even from here as they were all smiling terribly, to a man and surprisingly to a *woman*. Many animated whispers flitted through these troops at the sight of women in the enemy approaching, as it was a rare sight. Whilst there was only a small percentage of ferocious looking females in this host, their overt and colourful differences elevated these Prittans in appearance. The route back to their beachhead was through this enemy and this valley, but even as they were in ordered groups, this gave no clue as to their martial variations or how they would fight, but two things were abundantly clear; there was no way around them and they had not come here to chat about the weather.

“Ad Aciem!” Neleus roared at his men, and they formed up to his orders, but not quite quickly enough for this seasoned centurion now the enemy was in sight. “Lemanus!” He yelled, slapping the vinewood baton into his left palm ominously. “Get your fuckin’ men to pull the lead from their caligae, or they will all feel my *vicus* I warn you!” He shouted at his *optio principalis* as the cohorts of the 7th fell into formation and dressed off in their lines, their auxiliaries forming up hurriedly behind them. “Intente!” Neleus roared at them once all were fell in, and with a crash they came to attention. “Right you lot!” He snarled at them, his terrible warface emerging from under his gleaming helmet. “Listen in, as I will say this only once! You’ve all been gobbing off about wanting a crack at these hairy arsed Prittans. Well, there they are by Jupiter’s great cock!” He bellowed at them, his face filling with blood as he pointed across this burnt grass at the Prittans still advancing slowly across the blackened stubble toward them, step by step. This glittering centurion stalked these front ranks now, fuming in his red cloak and his polished armour, wrathfully brandishing his knobbly baton and throwing dark curses at the closing enemy, and at that precise moment, these soldiers were far more afraid of him than they were of these approaching tribesmen who had

ambushed them so neatly. This well-known and highly decorated centurion, Neleus of the 7th caught the eye of many experienced soldiers he knew, those who had fought alongside him many times before, and he nodded to these grisly men now, needing their courage and their support. These invaluable, experienced veterans took up the shout; "Caesar! Caesar! Caesar!" They crashed their fists to their chest plates at each shout, and every soldier here joined them, making Centurion Neleus growl his pleasure at this thumping, metallic crescendo. "We know what to do with those stupid long swords don't we lads!" He yelled at them over the din, and they shouted their agreement back.

His men knew from long and bloody experience that with practice, the Gaulish long swords could be trapped between their shields, just long enough to allow someone with a pair of plated leather gauntlets or a javelin shaft to bend them, which was not difficult especially with the older or poorer forged ones, and it rendered them almost useless.

"Just watch those fuckin' axes! And watch out for those farmers' sickles coming over the top and the spears underneath! Always keep one eye on me lads and listen out for my commands and whistles at all times. Do your duty, obey your orders and fight like Romans!" He demanded of them. "And we'll give these hairy arsed, ugly barbarians the worst kick in the fuckin' balls they've ever had!" He roared this at his men, spittle flying from his lips and his bared teeth, and they roared with him as their enemy approached without pause across this stubble, giving them a clearer impression of what now approached them in arms.

"See that big ugly cunnus in the middle? I'm going to gut the hairy pig and I'm going to piss on his fuckin' entrails!" This snarling oath came from the front ranks, and Neleus did not even have to turn his head.

"You Carpus, my excellent and battle eager miles gregarius will leave that big ugly cunnus to me, and that's a fuckin' order!" Their centurion growled, and there was much laughter behind him in the ranks and over Carpus' low growling.

“He would pluck off your head Carpus, as if he were pulling a petal from a daisy!” Didacus’ cultured drawl drew more laughter, causing Carpus’ misshapen face to darken at this slight to his prowess.

“I’ll pluck *your* fucking head off Didacus you knob polisher, and I’ll shit on the stump of your scrawny neck!” Carpus growled in response, the blood rising up his throat along with his escalating and infamous temper.

“Enough!” Neleus barked, and they fell silent. “The enemy is over there! If the big ugly cunnus kills me Carpus, you have my permission to gut him and to piss on his entrails!” Neleus informed him casually, and the men behind him laughed again, the consummately relaxed attitude of their centurion facing mortal combat bolstering their courage. Eolus, Tycho and Agapitus their optios stood behind the rear rank with their prods, securing that same courage. These three veteran officers would closely inspect the men arriving back down the lines for damage or missing and broken weapons as the ranks rotated and their exhausted legionaries tacked on behind. These optios were also the driving force behind these men, literally.

“Consider it done my honourable centurion sir!” Carpus growled again, screwing up his eyes then and scowling at the oncoming barbarians, choosing another target for his escalating fury.

As they had done so often in their past, Sisera his decanus stood to Carpus’ right in front of the aquilifer and their banner. This impressive man stood alongside the brutal Balorin and with eagle-eyed Ælianus standing to *intente* beyond him. Mighty Gabinus stood firm to Carpus’ left, before Balius ‘the bull’ and with the tall and capable Didacus alongside him. The ferocious looking Ferox was standing next in line along the front rank; their best man with a Pili, and these men were now ready, for anything. These mess mates had marched across Gaul and Germania together for years, and Carpus prepared himself for battle alongside them again now but in the last place he wanted to be, here in wild Pritania.

“Let’s give ‘em a *slotting* they won’t fuckin’ believe lads!” Sisera snarled this at his men from the rear, and they rumbled back their response.

“Parati!” Centurion Neleus barked, standing stiffly to attention. The men of this steadfast contubernium behind him opened their legs, along with all the other soldiers in the front ranks and they shifted their stances, turning side on. “Pila Tollite!” Came the next order from their glittering commanding officer, and they selected their first javelin. “Pila Parati!” Came the quickly following command from Neleus, and the 3rd of the 7th gripped their Pilli, preparing themselves for this fast-approaching Prittanic onslaught of wild looking men and women.

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This large taskforce was an alliance of Albion and Galedonian warriors, sent here as an organised test by *Pendragon* Cadallan ap Cadall and the five great sovereigns of these lands. They and all Prydein needed to know how the warriors of the ‘old enemy’ would fare fighting *together* for the first time and against a common enemy, and so, their peers had tasked these two northern kingdoms to be the first to deal with the Romans, these who had been allowed to escape their beachhead for the very same examination.

Crown Prince Cadwy ap Cridas of Selgofa and Albion leads this small army today along with his allies of a newly crowned king, several princes and many experienced nobles. His soldiery include two thousand of his own spearmen of Selgofa alongside four hundred of the legendary ‘quills’; his father’s very finest, elite warriors. This Albion force was supported by thirty-three war carbad of Prince Berwyn’s highly skilled Damnoniau, who are arrayed to the flanks and prepared for glory this important day. Their eye-catching banner of the *brown-bear* shares pride of place above this mighty force with the *wildcat* flag of Enouanta and the *sea-eagle* pennant of the Fotadiniau, all sharing the centre of this host with the fabulous and swirling, hump backed, long spined and monstrously tusked boar banner of ruling Albion. Under these fearsome banners and sitting to Cadwy’s right was his big Pencampwr Bleddyn ap Arawn, who sat upright in the

saddle of his big bay mare as was his custom. His champion nodded then and grinned at him like a mischievous child. Cadwy winked back at him with a grin of his own, each man feeling the other's building excitement.

Behind these aristocrats were their mounted officers and a full battalion of warriors, including a four hundred strong brigade of the *plufyn y baedd*, the intrepid and battle-seasoned, *specialist* spearmen of Albion. These ferocious warriors and their long spears were known for good reason as the 'quills of the boar', and they were led here today by their enormous and already victorious captain. The huge leader of these men, who has a contoured crest of stiff boar quills running down the centre of his huge helmet and who sports a bone white boar tusk mounted to each cheek piece was the God of war himself personified this day. This chiselled warrior has a square and jutting jaw which gives him a permanently challenging and belligerent look, one which sits well with his warlike personality. This impossibly large and muscular warrior is an impressive and dangerous looking individual with a clear attitude of the quick to kill, and with the air of the merciless hanging about him like an invisible cloak, he was ferocious to behold. This enormous brute, known and feared throughout Albion and Prydain is one Gŵyr Tŵyr ap Garth, the warrior who had already seen successful action on the beach against the Romans and had gloriously claimed the life of their infamously *ferocious* centurion. Looking as if he had survived some form of hideous and primeval selection process, this infamous mankiller of Selgofan and Albion legend had escaped the black wings of death countless times, and he was as ferocious and as pitiless in battle as his scarred face suggested. Tŵyr and his men of the 'quills' are not only armed with the slender, two foot longer and *snag-free* spears of their brigade, but also with their unique three sided and triple-edged stabbing swords, which is a long and honoured tradition of theirs coming straight from their Hittite past. The real 'quills of the boar' are their long and sleek spears which are rightly named; *plufyn y baedd*. Their equally unique triple-edged swords however are called *plufyn y cwt* by these superbly trained warriors and represent the shorter, stiffer spines found on the tail end of the ridgeback of a wild male boar. Each of

their soldiery also carry a unique, oval shield which bears a snarling boar's-head cygil and have a semi-circular void cut out of the lower right-hand edge of the rim, through which their comrades plunge their specialist spears.

King Galan of Epidia represented Galedon here today with two *alau* of his glorious cavalry, not yet come to the field and totalling six hundred of his peerless mounted warriors. The spectacular and newly crowned king of Epidia also led a hundred vassal cavalry and a token force of thirty-three chariots here, all coming from King Lleu's wild Wenyllon to complete Galedon's host this day. Since his late brother's recent but short-lived rebellion, Galan had unified Epidia by erasing Wrad's black cygil from his kingdom, and he then took the celebrated and druid-led walk against the sun at midnight to claim his crown and his kingship. His oath to share the country as two equal principalities with Wrad was just a memory now, and Galan had taken his father's beautiful crown; a heavy, double circlet of golden and opposing galloping horses, becoming King Galan ap Cerwyn of the ancient and honourable, unified House of Epidia. Here today, even as he was a king and Cadwy a prince, and even though Galan was older and battle tested, Epidia and Galedon had officially ceded power in today's battle to the crown prince of Albion. The beautiful flag fluttering alongside Galan's *white-stallion* banner was a smaller but equally honourable, allied pennant of a '*wren perched on dagger in-hand*', representing King Lleu's notorious horsemen and his noble charioteers, who had all travelled almost five hundred miles to be here today from wild Wenyllon.

Fachomagia was here represented by their *skull* banner alongside a token force from Tawescally under their *vixen* flags and who had all travelled similar distances to be here for the military evaluation of their Roman enemy required of them this day. It was Albion men who made up the infantry however; the main bulk and the shield wall of this allied taskforce, and so, their beloved crown prince had been declared the *pencad* of this force and by the pendragon himself. In view of Galan's somewhat supportive role, many of his Galedonian warriors were surprised at him taking a backseat to the young Albion prince, until they recalled or were

reminded exactly who that fortunate young man was about to marry. He was soon to be their liege lord and high king of all Galedon's son-in-law, and it was this undeniable fact which had made the chain of command here today acceptable to all concerned. In fact, Cadwy's pending royal handfasting to Ederus' daughter had in some way galvanised these northern families of entirely analogous Brythons but from two historically and perennially warring tribes into one single minded fighting force, assembled here on this burnt and stinking stubble field as an examination of them and their enemy by their pendragon. The dictator and ultimate military leader of all Prydein currently; Pendragon Cadallan, along with the five glorious kings of this country had hoped for just such a meeting of minds and attitudes. This was the defence of the nation no less, and with the import of that alone it was time that the phrase *old enemy* was once and for all consigned to Prydeinig history in the north. This action too today represented to many veterans in Selgofa the *barn-isarno* of a certain famous young 'prince of the boar' and his 'iron-challenge' to become a bona fide Tywysog. These seasoned soldiers of Albion and Galedon both knew however that 'the proof of the blood pudding lies always in the eating', and one way or another, they knew today would most certainly prove if Cadwy ap Cridas was up to that title. The young commander of these seasoned troops sat easily on his magnificent chestnut warhorse *Tywysog*, and to his right-hand was arrayed the glory of Galedon, the other horn of this bull of rampage these Brythons had brought to this isolated valley. Their glorious Epidian king sat astride Epona herself come-to-earth in the snow-white and pristine form of the dazzling horse lady Galwena. She stood imperiously, flicking an ear in impatience and easily outdoing the iconic representation flapping in the breeze above her; the dazzling cygil of the gold crowned and rearing white stallion of 'unified' Epidia.

As this allied Battlegroup completed its formations and all had fallen in at their correct places, strung-out all along the base of this wide valley and effectively blocking their enemy's access to ocean, a huge man in a black bearskin cloak and with the sun-bleached skull of a bear strapped to his

head stood tall on the back of a big chariot to the left flank. At an exaggerated nod from Cadwy, this obvious leader lifted one muscular and beringed arm making a clear signal, and the effect was immediate. Abruptly, his charioteers sped from both flanks and tore across this black stubble, charging the loose Romans with a reckless abandon. These Damnonian drivers cracked their long whips, and their vehicles shot forward, rattling and banging as their occupants attacked the enemy valiantly and directly, achieving much success initially with the scattered troops who were caught in midfield, and who tried belatedly to scamper back to their ranks. They were too slow, and many fell, tripping over their big leather bags or the uneven, hand cut and burnt stalks, to be speared by dozens of accurately thrown spears. The unluckier were run over by these thundering carbads of Berwyn, to much applause and wild cheering from the ranks of their combrogi. These fantastic Damnonian charioteers made great sport of running over these Romans, the living and the dead alike, bouncing into the air as the wheels struck the enemy's body. A howl would erupt from both occupants as they clung on, laughing madly, and a cheer would erupt from their onlooking ranks of bristling spearmen. When placed correctly, a wheel would decapitate a Roman with a crunching 'snap', and the head would fly off high into the air behind the chariot, trailing streaks of blood behind it. A wildly careering Wenyllon driver had just achieved this heroic manoeuvre, and he made a sharp and skidding turn across this burned crop field, with his noble passenger clinging to the wildly canting rear with one hand whilst leaning down and out with the other. A clean pick up of the same severed head was cheered loudest of all, as the claiming of enemy heads was still seen by many as a deeply honourable achievement especially by the aristocracy, and that fearless gawres managed to snatch the Roman head her driver had just removed from its body, from the ground and as they clattered past at neck breaking speed. This highly animated warrior then held her blood dripping trophy high, still in its gleaming helmet, and the raucous cheering from the Brythonic ranks emboldened this reckless aristocrat, so that she bravely 'ran the pole' to hang that enemy head with a specialised leather

lace around the neck of one of her horses for just that purpose, and before the next mad dash into peril and glory with her madly grinning driver.

As the Romans reassembled, retreating slowly and in formation from these fast and deceptively agile chariots and the bold and accurate spearmen within them, the ground they reversed over proved far too rutted for them to follow. Some did, and many a spear-thrower was catapulted off the rawhide lattice of a chariot's rear platform, to sail into the air and to crash in a heap on the turf, spilling all his or her *bri* on the grass and in front of the Roman *gelyn*, to much cheering and ribald abuse from their own comrades. The sprung seats saved the drivers from a similar ignominious decant, but only just, and they also flew into the air each time, holding tightly onto the reins and howling at the sheer fun of it. Their outwardly propelled partners would jump to their feet quickly and sprint for their chariots if they were able and as their drivers swung back around to get them, the air around them both thick with dangerous *whizzing* things. Once aboard again, the cheering would get louder from the ranks, and these noble men and women would then turn and attack immediately once more with great courage and verve. The warrior would draw a fresh spear from the leather boot on the rail and loose it at the enemy as his driver furiously cracked his whip, both dodging incoming missiles and grinning like fools as they clattered past the Romans once more. A row of overgrown ditches had proved almost catastrophic for a more adventurous phalanx of these charging carbads, who had crashed over them with a tremendous series of loud bangs. Numerous honourable spearmen and women had been thrown headlong into the second of these ditches from their drivers' enthusiasm, and even the Romans cheered. One unfortunate had been facing the rear when her fabulously decorated chariot hit the first ditch with a tremendous crash, and the rawhide slatting under her foot sprung, allowing her left leg to drop between the cross straps rather than catapulting her out of it. This pale and slim young noble looked to be no more than a teenager, but she was facing backwards, struggling madly to free her trapped leg as her chariot careered down into the shallow gulley before the next ancient bank. With

the front of her thigh held tight against the rear rail, her left heel caught the top of the next ditch as the chariot clattered over it, and it snapped her leg below the knee like a twig. Her scream was loud but short, as a Roman javelin flew down her open mouth, appearing at least two feet from the back of her head and her long blonde hair in a crimson welter of blood and brains. This worthy but painfully young Damnonian *gawres* flopped backwards with a foreign spear protruding from her mouth, and with her broken leg dangling horribly below the bed of the chariot as it hobbled back to its lines on buckled wheels.

Two well-dressed men limping along this low and overgrown ditch were dragging an injured comrade with them and keeping their heads down as Roman slingshot buzzed around their heads like huge and angry, superfast bees. These battle mates knew those things carried more than just a *buzz* and a sting, and so they kept low. They were collected by their drivers, and on chariots which did not quite run straight anymore, and so they trotted their dazed horses back to sanctuary with wobbly wheels. These reckless charioteers had been forced to withdraw from the field before they doomed themselves in their ardour, and so the Damnoniau clattered around to the rear now, to where those victorious battle pairs dismounted, abandoned their carbads with squires and re-joined their noisy ranks on foot. A huge roar erupted from this reformed host then, and they all joined their voices in ferocious challenge; 'Prydein! Prydein! Prydein!' They roared in one enormous voice at these foreign trespassers. The air shook with their shouts, and thousands of spears punctured the same air, all shaken in dire demonstration and murderous threat. These Roman invaders had formed up quickly into their fighting block formations, roughly fifty reeds away and with their dark skins and polished steel plates stark against their blood red cloaks, their weapons glinting wickedly in this weak sunshine. Two tall and fabulous leaders stalked the front ranks of that enemy and in the most splendid armour and amazing helmets, shouting at their men in their unfamiliar words and preparing them for this impending battle they could not escape from.

Cadwy swept his gaze across that row of steel, leather, wood and wool ahead of him in this valley, made up of men standing in precise, machine like furrows of polished metal, and it looked so alien to him it was unnerving. They were all so identical and seemed inhuman, especially their glittering centurions at the front, and Cadwy spat his nerves to the grass. Turning in his saddle he nodded then to the major on his right, and this beautifully dressed and now familial officer in turn made a signal to his big sergeant-major, mounted to his right. Meyrug made a brief signal to an observant young cornwr, who had to emulate his prince and spit his nerves to the ground before he was able to blow the strident call to advance. To this blaring and rising, clarion call, the old enemies of Albion and Galedon marched forwards together for the first time into battle. The steady tramp of warboots in stiff, cremated stubble raised small black clouds of soot around their feet as they moved off, and their crunching tempo competed with the metallic and wooden, clanking and banging rhythm which always accompanied marching soldiers. Bereft of bards this day due to some mass national conference, the cantorion among these fearless northern warriors took the honour, and the first bars of 'The Courage of Crydon Hîr' floated up in rich, harmonic beauty. The Romans stood fast now to receive them, and Gŵyr Tŵyr ap Garth had placed himself just off centre in the front rank and to the right, so that he would come up against the biggest of those two formidable centurions, gleaming in their plate armour and bristling helmets. Tŵyr stood almost a foot taller and broader than the men around him, but they were packed shoulder to shoulder alongside him and armed to the teeth. Their ominous smiles matched his now as they marched proudly beside him toward these invading foreigners and to this glorious singing.

Albion were over four hundred shields wide and five ranks deep, with the *Quills* in the centre of the 1st and 2nd and with their dark-green mantles and notched shields marking them out to their combrogi. As Albion and Galedon advanced to the clamour of their kit, the crunching thump of their warboots and the upswell of their valiant voices across the whole width of this valley floor, the front-rank spearmen locked the rims of their shields

together now with a ricochet of *thuds*, preparing themselves for this fast-approaching contact, knowing it was going to be colossal. Inexorably the gap closed, thirty-five reeds becoming thirty in a blink, and now dozens of strange looking foreign javelins streaked towards them, and as round shields thumped a few of them away, some screamed, and the singing died at that painful cry, on this formidable day. At a signal, every single warrior began to crash his or her weapon against their shields in their marching rhythm, and it sounded like the thundering charge of a great host of ancient and immortal giants on this scorched ground at the heart of this wooded valley. Cadwy stood in his bootstraps to get a clearer view, his heart hammering in his chest and in tempo with this great crashing of arms about him. He dodged a streaking javelin, just by swaying out of its trajectory in his saddle before taking one last look at the distance to the formations facing him. It was time, and he yelled the order they had all waited for.

“Rhuthro! Ymlaen!” He screamed; his face suffused with his rage. The earth shook as they did just that, and these two northern nations charged headlong into Prydeinig history. Moments later, and with a resounding crash which reverberated around this field and down this valley like a clap of thunder, more than four hundred round Brythonic shields crashed against a roughly equal number of tall and identical oval scutum, and the sweating, the heaving and the dying began. As soon these opposing shields met with this great echoing crash, the single word calls began from the *quills* in the 2nd rank, and their men in the 1st shifted slightly. The killing steel quills of the Albion *boar* began to flash forwards then, and the blood of their enemies flowed onto this sacred and Gods’ blessed land of Caint.

Gŵyr Tŵyr ap Garth engaged the huge centurion to his right, and these two men set about each other with a ferocious intensity, shoving and stabbing at each other furiously whilst roaring in their own languages at each other. Each was a seasoned warrior and adroit in the minutiae of close combat, parrying, shifting and performing thoughtless balance in

movement whilst fighting to the death. They struck out like snakes at each other's vital points, and the chaotic slaughter around them retreated into a fuzzy, shifting and shoving human alleyway as their focus became sharp and highly concentrated on nothing but killing one another.

Cadwy drew Lladdwyr-glaer and spurred Tywysog forward to crush the other centurion who was only reeds away, but the Roman dodged away neatly, slashing at Cadwy's left knee with his sword. The prince parried it easily, but his and his gŵyrd's horses were turned by the immovable wall of shields before them and they reared up, shying away, and so they were forced to withdraw. They had tested the Roman shield wall and it had held fast, so Cadwy and his officers galloped from the line and dismounted, handing the reins to their military *faner* before turning simultaneously and re-joining the battle on foot with an unbridled enthusiasm. The Roman officer beyond his ranks and in the middle of this explosive melee fought to Cadwy's left, valiantly holding his position, and this swarthy centurion roared at his men, his naturally dark face filling with blood as he bolstered their courage with his shouts and encouragements and his curse filled urges for them to hold. His soldiers were responding to him and stiffening, increasing the ferocity of their defensive attacks. Cadwy pushed and shoved, trying to force himself through these tightly packed warriors to fight him, as he hated that centurion implacably at this deeply frustrating moment. He knew that such an experienced leader, a man who led from the front, kept order in his ranks and roared curses at his enemies whilst fighting like a demon himself could make all the difference in this battle. Men stood and fought for such conspicuous, inspirational leaders; men who risked their lives every moment in battle. Cadwy knew that soldiers would follow officers like this one anywhere, but more crucially they would not desert him when it counted the most. His men would stand, and so Cadwy's duty was clear to him; he had to remove this centurion from the field in any way possible.

Warriors *never* pushed forwards through the ranks to get at the frontline in battle, so he found this surprise helpful, and warriors would shift and

shove to give him and his officers enough space to squeeze their way forward. Cadwy's eyes never left the shining brilliance of that battling Roman officer ahead however, and he kept up this heaving and pushing forward with his *cyfail* pressing in closely behind him.

Cadwy and all his *cyfail* were well informed on Roman ranks and formations, and he knew by his arms and by the strange cross-mounted helmet crest that this fearless warrior was a *canwriad*; a centurion. This man was a warrior of note, and one of the brutal and battle-hardened Roman officers who always led from the front, and this one looked a prime and brutal example. Cadwy had learned his Gallic dialects, his Latin and his Greek just as every young Brythonic lord had to, and he heard that centurion call out instruction now over the din to a Lemanus and to one Eolus, names which sounded so alien to his ears still, but he marked them and the response, naming this centurion as one Neleus, and it too he marked well. He also knew that those subordinate 'optios' he had instructed would be at the back somewhere, prodding their men forwards and propelling them onwards with their batons. Cadwy and all these allied men and women were completely prepared for the rotating of Roman ranks, and they battled on bravely in anticipation of it, just as he battled on to get to the front and that roaring centurion.

Many Romans to the outer wings of this long and undulating, highly contested line of opposing shields faced burly warriors cloaked in thick brown fur. Some Romans had been killed outright and instantly by the unique weapons wielded by these warriors who were all big men, and which the Romans had no doubt considered to be nothing more than crude and mass-produced farmer's sickles at first sight. These brown clad killers with their bear fur cloaks and helmets and their strange white, animalistic and skull painted faces were the *grafangau yr arth*; Damnonia's legendary frontline warriors. Their razor-sharp crescents of flexible polished steel of the same name were no mere farmer's sickles. The 'claws of the bear' were finely forged and crafted instruments of unmatched, overhead helmet puncture. They also punctured skulls and

brains effortlessly or any normal, leather mounted armour plate. Their feminine lines with their gleaming tapers, and the chamfers and cambers of their curved blades were things of long evolution and the purest beauty. Their precise crescent shape allowed them to be withdrawn cleanly and easily from punctured, curving steel plate, no mean feat from their expert forgers. These metal masters had discovered a need to fashion a strong heel to these weapons, and a tough, tapering spine forged through the heart of them, giving them a hard-edged yet flexible blade which would not twist or break in the hands of a master. When employed correctly the 'claws' were devastating, and when cleanly struck through the crowns of their enemy's heads they would drop like sacks of bones to the ground, fountaining one long arc of jetting blood from the holed dent in their helms. It would splash red and noisy to the green grass like hot, jug-poured wine, and the claws of the bear were busy, and they were loud this day of days.

As Cadwy finally pushed his way through the sweaty press of bodies in these two front ranks, he was fortunate to be tall enough to see over these heaving lines, and one tall and thin Roman soldier off to his right caught his eye. This man's helmet looked loose and too big for him, but this incongruous looking soldier was putting up a tremendous fight, battering like a lunatic at the shields in front of him and shouting continuously whilst his comrades tried to protect him.

"Come on Carpus! Pull your fucking finger out or we'll be here all day! You, lazy, goat - shagging - bastard - son - of a - diseased - camel!" This man cursed loudly, still hammering away at the men in front of him with his sword at each word and dodging a swift reply to his head like a rat, making Cadwy shake his head in amazement. He could just make out between the good Latin and the gutter the man's jocular meaning yet made at the height of battle and oddly delivered in a cultured way, nonetheless. It was a total surprise to him, and it cut through the bedlam. This tall soldier flicked the helmet up from his eyes then and caught Cadwy's look across the madness. He gave him a smile and a friendly

wink, before his long and thin face returned to stone and he resumed his attack on the men in front of him with an undimmed savagery. Cadwy was astonished at this man's coolness and at the height of battle, and as he was pushed and pulled in this tight crowd he could not help but be impressed at the obvious worth of that tall, enigmatic soldier. His coarse and curse filled challenge had strangely infuriated a squat and broad looking Roman fighting three paces from him. This soldier, who was clearly the maligned 'Carpus' went absolutely berserk, throwing his long shield at the Albion ranks in front of him and then rushing at them from behind it. This affronted Carpus then began cleaving at anything that moved within range of his sword, and a body littered space cleared around him quickly as he was good, and his ugly face was twisted with a savage joy.

"I will find you and I will kill you Didacus, you lanky, tunic-lifting whoreson! After I've killed this fucking lot!" This furious denizen yelled over the tumult of battle. "Come on then you backward, hairy-arsed Pritans! Let's fucking have it!" This squat and incensed soldier screamed at Cadwy's Selgofan spearmen, and his Roman comrades were lifted by his terrible anger, joining him in his crazed attack and trying to smash the surprised Brythons to Cadwy's right hand back. Only Bleddyn had the opportunity and the courage to face him, and this big but young champion roared 'Selgofa!' at the top of his voice as he broke ranks to attack this Roman butcher, who was now splattered from head to foot in Brythonic blood. Cadwy's bold but untested and teenage pencampwr stormed in with no shield and in his well-rehearsed charge where no other would, bellowing like an enraged young bull, and the Roman smiled grimly as if he had seen all this type of bluff and bluster before. The ferocious Carpus stepped confidently forwards and at just the right moment, lunging with his short sword to cleave Bleddyn's ribs wide open. His look of savage joy turned to one of complete surprise, when the big and muscular man moved like a wraith and the Roman stabbed at vacated thin air. The look of surprise was frozen on his ugly, olive-skinned face forever at that moment and as its supporting head left his body in that same blink of an eye, spinning

high up into the air in a welter of wet crimson. Bleddyn killed another Roman to his right then with a sideways step and a vicious, upward backhand cut on the reverse swing and which sliced this unfortunate Roman's face clean off along with part of his jaw and the front of his skull. This Roman's new brain face was a holed and blank, pink mess, and he fell flat upon it at the same moment his comrade's helmeted head hit the ground beside him with a heavy metallic *thump*. The Romans in the front ranks looked on wide eyed as this huge young warrior danced between them with his terrifying and flashing sword, felling men as a coppicer fells unwanted saplings. As he stormed forward with a merciless look on his youthful but broad and bearded, blood splashed face, Bleddyn neatly sidestepped a javelin thrust almost without thought and ignored the attacker. Pivoting away on his left heel and with a notable grace for such a big man, Bleddyn killed an optio instantly, and one who was approaching him from behind. Cadwy's calm and ice-cold champion chopped diagonally downwards with a two handed and colossal overhead power cut, striking the enemy soldier's left collarbone above his shoulder plates with every ounce of strength he possessed. The power of the stroke was such that his razor-sharp sword hardly paused before *Caled-taro* cleared the body just above the man's right hip. Cadwy's roaring pencampwr had cut the Roman optio diagonally in half. As this sundered soldier fountained blood and slid apart into a mess at his feet, Bleddyn automatically spun around into the upright guard, expecting the second thrust from the spearman he had just dodged and ignored. 'Hard-killer' turned the steel shaft of the javelin beautifully, and then Bleddyn smashed the spiked pommel of his sword into the man's right eye, killing him instantly. With the chaos of battle erupting all around him, the big man took an elegant dance step to his left then, *Caled-taro* describing another glittering, upward arc behind him as he brought him over for another massive killing blow to the tall and wiry soldier approaching. Bleddyn reared backwards with a loud yell, and his left arm dropped from the sudden blow. The fletched half of an arrow protruded from the front of Bleddyn's chest, high up toward the left shoulder, and he roared in pain as well as fury. Using

the fingers of his sword hand, he managed to wedge his left thumb under his belt to trap the useless arm, and Bleddyn fought on one handed, but his incapacity did not go unnoticed by his enemies. A handful of opportunistic Roman soldiers began to flank him and then sought to surround him.

“Hefin! Ioddo! To me!” Cadwy screamed at them, the centurion forgotten, and these Albion princes and their officers pressed forward to the *right* now, rudely barging through the men in front of them to join Cadwy. Together, they set about getting to the Romans who were trying to kill or capture their beloved combrogi. As hard as they struggled and fought through their own men, it seemed that they would never get there in time for Bleddyn was compromised on three sides already, chalk white with the pain and sweating like a slave in line for castration. Cadwy thrashed at the men in front of him with his fists as another scream of panic welled up in his throat, as it was obvious those Romans had realised that he and his gŵyr were trying to save a valued friend, and they surged forwards to prevent them. Out of the blue, the huge and muscular frame of one Sergeant-Major Meyrug ap Prys suddenly careered head down into this melee and at full pelt, smashing into the leading group of these encroaching Romans like a human battering ram. Meyrug arrived behind a long cavalry shield and with an enormous crash, screaming his ‘Albion’ warcry, and the shield shattered into splinters at the colossal impact. The forward group of Romans were sent sprawling to the ground, but this reckless attack had given the Albion group the seconds they had needed to rescue Meyrug’s injured new best friend and drinking partner. Two of these Romans had been knocked senseless by this powerful shield ram, and another had rolled away stunned with his face smashed and bleeding whilst the fourth jumped to his feet but supporting an injured arm. The huge Albion soldier was himself stunned and on his knees among the splinters, and the rest of these flanking Romans closed back in, with steel in their fists and with vengeance in their eyes. They were brought up short however and by the sudden arrival of an upright form, one of a tall and finely dressed Brythonic officer of middle years sporting short, iron grey

hair and bristling moustaches. He held an aged long sword upright and stood in an old-fashioned stance, with a serious but slightly pompous look on his long face. A couple of these Romans snickered at the sight, eyeing his pretty uniform with its silver buttons as they closed in, openly assessing their value. They were not so confident a few furious moments later when three of them lay squealing and bleeding on the ground, and Brif-Lôn Brast ap Bwlch looked as though he had not moved a muscle. This imperious officer stooped then to pick his man up with his left arm under Meyrug's left armpit and he lifted him, his bloodied sword at the ready. Facing opposite directions and with their long swords flashing, these two linked men then made their way back to their lines before Meyrug recovered enough for the two men to retire safely. Together they made a daunting rear guard, and so that the injured Bleddyn could be removed from the field. This bold Selgofan party had successfully extracted their valiant champion to the sudden demise of two more Romans, the two who dared impede these lords of battle in all their gold and silver decorated fury. Their bejewelled and gold trimmed accoutrements had beguiled and tempted many a Roman to take a chance at the loot so boldly worn by these warriors, but those invaders had paid the ultimate price for their folly, as these men and women had earned their wealth the hard way; the iron way, with their swords. Their spearmen surged forwards, smashing into the Roman ranks again as two strong men of Selgofa helped Bleddyn from the field and to the hospital porters at the rear, to much applause and cheering from the rear ranks.

The Romans had steadily retreated after this shocking initial onslaught, but tactically and very cunningly, catching many over-extended Brythons out with timed and practised lunges, for which lightning strikes their gladii were supremely suited. Nonetheless, it was decided that this was the moment, and by a patient and beautifully mounted gŵyr in a winged helmet and a sky-blue cloak who had been stationed on a nearby hill. It was clear to him that the Romans had retreated to the desired location, and that the time had finally arrived for the Galedonian cavalry's valiant

contribution. This fabulously attired and mounted lord with a winged helmet barked an eagerly awaited order to a young Epidian cornwr.

A distant bronze war horn sounded from somewhere, and Galan's fabulous cavalry suddenly took the field, galloping in from the forest's edge to the east. They swept behind the Romans as Cadwy roared his men on, his Albion host clashing again with the enemy formations to the front. The horsemen and charioteers of Wenyllon then swept down from the north, and the Romans' focus and fears were neatly divided by the timely arrival of this twin host of cavalry and vehicles. All these newly arrived, mounted warriors brandished wickedly long lances or glimmering, leaf shaped swords, and the optios at the back of the Roman blocks could be heard screaming at their men to change formation. The *Quills of the Boar* surged forwards again then as planned, and with their specialist spearmen springing into action with the most impeccable timing.

Gŵyr Tŵyr ap Garth in his boar-quilled helmet roared with triumph, and his face was suffused with his glory and the same blood which now poured from his arm. The Roman centurion lay at his feet, his throat torn away by Tŵyr's triple-edged spike, and he stood then with the sun glinting off his blood-spattered armour, screaming his men on and roaring his battlecry to the heavens. This spirit touched, glory filled warrior held up his strange and bloody sword, which had now amazingly claimed the lives of two of these seasoned and battle-hardened *canwriad* of world repute. The gallant spearmen of the Selgofau who supported their elite comrades of the *Plufyn*, came forth now from the 3rd 4th and 5th ranks and to surge forwards around this towering leader. These valiant spearmen had also been equipped with the utterly beautiful and new, excellent short swords of Caswallawn's issue, to the surprise and horror of many Roman gelyn, especially those who tried the old Gaulish trick as these short and sinuous blades did not bend; they bit. These beautiful, bluish, slender and leaf shaped blades of such superb Trojan design and quality, created by the most talented twin smiths in Prydein were soon spilling hot and foreign

blood to this ground, where it was joyfully received by Arglwydd Lug Ddu and all Prydein's attendant Gods.

Galan's dual cavalry charge had split the Roman's shifting rear formations, and at the precise moment required. Wheeling quickly then to flank the two outer, rectangular formations, these whooping Epidian horsemen tore into them. Their long lances began to shred these suddenly exposed and panicked men at the fringes, and it took enormous courage for them to hold in tight formation in the face of such a ferocious mounted attack. At the front, Brythons crouching in the second ranks thrust upwards with their spears, and glistening coils of their enemies' bowels would tumble out. To the screaming of these eviscerated men, the Brythons surged forward, stomping those guts into a stringy mess and filling the air with a sewage stench. As the Romans' shield wall began to break down at these front ranks from the flashing *quills of the boar* and many other honourable family units alongside the sharp *fangs of the cat* and at the fringes from the hooked *claws of the bear*, and at the rear now from Galan and Lleu's long and piercing lances, these once precise formations fractured. Slowly, like blocks of dried salt dropped into a puddle of blood warm water they began to crumble. The Roman war machine then broke down completely, and the dynamics of this battle changed with it, becoming a chaotic mass of Roman soldiers on a burnt field in a deep valley and with writhing knots of fighting tribal warriors all around it. As men died and other others shifted to fill the sudden gaps, this battle in turn also became peppered with individual matches of single combat.

The blond, vital and handsome Prince Ioddo of the Fotadinau with a screaming sea eagle emblazoned across his proud chest plate ran into a clearing made by the flashing blades of his father's senior gŵyrd, and he was surrounded instantly by a swirling mass of fighting, stabbing and dying men. This popular young prince and one of Cadwy's closest friends was the first to reach this clearing, and he came face-to-face with the last one of these strange, olive-skinned officers with the crossed brushes on

their helms. With his blood-smeared axes twirling Ioddo was laughing with the excitement and the sheer unadulterated, blood rushing joy of it all. His blue eyes flashed, competing with the sapphires in the stunning torc around his noble neck, and Ioddo began one of his spectacular pirouetting routines. His feet spun neatly with a fine, elegant balance and his corn-yellow plait swung around his head as he rotated beautifully in a dazzling approach. Suddenly, he opened out and flashed one of his beautifully engraved axes at the Roman's neck. It was the first mistake he had made that morning and it was the last mistake this young and devilishly handsome prince would ever make. The experienced Roman officer had anticipated the opening and neatly sidestepped the sweeping steel axe head. Using Ioddo's momentum and shoving the axe away easily with his sword, and just as the blond prince spun around again, with a lightning jab, the centurion thrust his flat gladius over the top. He punched it through the fine, fair beard of his enemy and into Ioddo's throat with a deftness of long practice and faultless timing. The tip of his gladius struck Ioddo's spine with a jarring shock, and the second axe bounced feebly and harmlessly from the centurion's shoulder plates, as Ioddo was already dead.

Cadwy roared in a savage disbelief, tearing himself from the melee and running at the Roman with a terrible, black emotion welling up in him and at that heartrending image which seemed to burn into his soul. 'If he hadn't gone to save Bleddyn, *he* would have been the first to challenge this centurion, not Ioddo'. His unfeeling fingers dropped the shield to the ground as he ran across the grass, and just as his young friend's golden hair was drenched in his own red and royal blood. Ioddo too flopped to the ground at that same sickening moment, and he fell at the Roman's feet with his head at a strange angle.

The centurion looked up at this young but well-dressed warrior as he charged him, seeing that he was a noble and clearly driven by a compulsion far more powerful than reason. Reading his tortured face, this glittering Roman officer smiled at him knowingly and savagely before

turning side on to receive him. The Roman calmly prepared to meet his onrush, the wicked smile in place, and with his most recent victim's warm blood still dribbling from the sharp tip of his sword, he dropped into a crouch. At first contact, the centurion parried the deceptive killing lunge of this enraged elite, but only just, and he was forced backwards by his enemy's maddened impetus. This career soldier had the experience however to slash out with his gladius on their chaotic disengagement, splitting the bridge of his opponent's nose to the skull.

Cadwy knew he was sorely injured, but also knew in his heart it was not a mortal wound. Setting his feet, he bobbed under the slashing backhand that he knew was coming and which would have removed his head. He took a step backwards then and wiped the streaming blood from his eyes with his left thumb and finger, quickly parrying another blow aimed at his head, before stepping away neatly and gathering himself.

'Arglwydd Camulo I offer you my prayer and ask for your blessing. You are the everlasting God of war, the great red God of battle, and I beseech you, aid me as I fight in your name in these coming moments and to *your* glory!' He sent this wordless plea to his inspirational God of war as he circled this smiling killer, and the clamour and the screams of battle faded around him then as if he had ducked his head under shallow water. The clear blue bubble of calmness welled up in him again too, and his balance and his years of training also kicked in as he engaged this centurion once more, but with a growing control. Using his lifelong and endlessly practised swordsmanship, Cadwy put away his injury and the clamour of this battle raging around him. Thankfully, the blood stayed clear of his eyes to run down the left side of his face and to drip from his nose, but the wound pulsed painfully now, and he forced himself to ignore it. Performing his deep breathing techniques, Cadwy entered the white zone of Cornonnyn gratefully as his breathing normalised and his hammering heartbeat began to ease. Time slowed along with his heart, and although he felt as though he was flowing deliberately but smoothly, to an outside observer his feet would have been a blur. He began a bold attack, but

feinted and ducked under the lightning repost with the quickness of a stoat, entering precisely the point in their personal combat zone from where he had chosen carefully to kill this man. He was losing blood steadily now and knew he had to do it quickly, and so Cadwy dropped into a crouch as the Roman turned to face him and cut savagely at where his neck should have been. Cadwy's wideset feet found their natural position as did his centre of balance, and he suddenly faced the man again but from waist height and to his clear surprise. As his bloodied gladius *whooshed* harmlessly over Cadwy's head, he rose up powerfully on the balls of his feet, exploding upwards with exquisite timing and with every ounce of his strength. With his perfectly angled blade a silvered blur, Cadwy's powerful legs and buttocks propelled him upwards as if he had been launched from a springboard. His vengeful warrior spirit soared to the heavens as he delivered his sword and his battlecry together. "For Ioddo ap Cennydd and for ALBION!" He screamed at the Roman, his spittle flying at the cynical and swarthy face as he rose to meet it. His body was as taut as a bowstring as he rose in this blur of savage, lunging movement. His right arm was like a rope and leather strung limb of forged steel, and it too swept violently upwards. Lladdwyr-glaer's needle sharp tip pierced the leather between the Roman's breast plates as if it was not there, and as the polished metal plates sprung apart, Cadwy cleaved the man's rib cage wide open. A welter of scalding blood gushed from the man's torn ribs and his gashed and gaping lung to splash hotly over Cadwy's sword hand which he quickly supported with his left, and he thrust upwards again; hard. The Roman's tanned, olive face paled and registered an immense shock as their eyes locked, and Cadwy watched his enemy die, his own eyes blazing that craved for death. Hearing the man's gladius hit the ground, he lifted with all his strength again, and the air gurgled wetly out of this dying Roman. "For Ioddo ap Cennydd, you worthless filth!" He roared at him, inches from his face, and Cadwy held the weight of this man on his sword which shone clear from his back. The Roman's feet dangled inches from the ground, flapping like a brace of beached mackerel as he began to shuffle painfully from this foreign world

into the next. "*Meus niger Deus te exspectat Neleus!*" 'My black God awaits you Neleus' Cadwy growled at him in perfect Latin, naming him, and the Roman's eyes registered a brief moment of shocked terror before they dulled forever. As the blood drained from his enemy's cheeks to pour from his dead mouth and his torn chest, Cadwy relaxed his rigid wrists, and the centurion slid off his blade, sinking to the ground at his feet. Wiping the dribbling blood from his eyes again and dispassionately watching the final twitches and tics of this foreign gelyn, thoughts of Ioddo crowded his mind, and he looked over to his broken body on the ground, just a few reeds away. A clear image of that last wink from Ioddo on the practice ground came to mind when he had been alive, laughing and mortal, and Cadwy's heart was breaking. A screamed shout from Hefin broke his grieving in a heartbeat, making Cadwy jerk his head around, and just in time as a Roman had launched a well thrown javelin at him and it streaked toward him with an unnerving accuracy. It would surely have skewered him in the back were it not for the warning, and he reacted like a cat, leaping to one side as it blazed past him, brushing his clothing. The brave Roman soldier had chased his missile in, closing the ground quickly to use his sword in close quarter, but this excellent and much practiced pursuit was his undoing. Cadwy recognised this man as another optio by his longitudinal helmet brush, equal to a Brythonic captain in rank, and they were always skilled and seasoned soldiers. This optio's short sword was drawn and his tanned face was twisted into a rictus of hatred as he charged him with his teeth bared, committed to the headlong pursuit of his spear now and in the hope of catching Cadwy napping. In the blink of an eye however Cadwy had quickly stepped forwards himself at the *present*, and his sudden onrush halved the distance in a heartbeat allowing the Roman no way of dodging Lladdwyr-glaer, and so, the optio ran onto the sharp tip of Cadwy's extended long sword with a truly shocked expression on his face. The point took him low in the throat and glanced off his vertebrae on the way out, tearing open his neck to a splash of red. The impetus of Cadwy's long and heavy Brythonic sword knocked the man clean off his feet, his legs flying up as he thumped

heavily to the ground. The optio's iron studded sandals thrummed the grass for long moments as he gurgled his life away on his back, clutching at his torn throat and with his tanned face twisted in agony. The crashing sounds of battle suddenly zoomed back into focus for Cadwy, and he watched dispassionately as the clawed fingers of this man's hand still grasped at his throat in the futility of one man's final throes of death, but this optio was soon still apart from the growing pool of spilled blood around his helmeted head. Cadwy stood in stunned amazement and to a huge roar of approval from his cyfaiil behind him, but it was short-lived. The Romans had pushed forward again, clearly incensed at the death of their optio, and shouting their vengeance, they charged toward him. Cadwy swept Lladdwyr-glaer around himself and crouched, ready to move in any direction, looking around himself to place his position in this explosive brawl.

"For Agapitus!" The Romans roared before surging powerfully toward him.

Brythonic lines charged forward once more to meet them, quickly enveloping their prince in a painted, limewood and steel bristling embrace, but Cadwy was fighting immediately, parrying a leading soldier who hacked at him with his gladius. A slender, Brythonic spear from Cadwy's right took this Roman in the throat, and with a gurgle he vanished. Superb Selgofan spearmen were pressing forwards now, filling the gaps all around Cadwy, and as this lumbering shield wall locked once more around their valiant young commander, the sweating, the heaving, the cursing and the dying resumed.

Cadwy was astonished at how physically drained he felt, and just how much his sword arm and his shoulder ached. He looked around himself now, and his eyelids too felt leaden with blood smearing his vision again, but he realised with a rush of emotions that this battle was far from over. The ambush of the Roman patrol had started well enough despite it being far larger than they had expected, and although two centurions and a few optios were down, these Romans were a long way from beaten. These amazing Roman soldiers had already reformed and were counterattacking

again now, roaring their battle cries, and without warning, they were fighting harder than ever to gain an advantage. Other, senior Roman leaders and veterans had pushed through from behind to take up the fight and to boost the morale and the fighting spirit of their men, taking the place of their fallen officers. These doughty, foreign warriors surged into the Brythonic ranks again, screaming their incomprehensible curses and warcries, and this battle intensified noticeably. Their equally surrounded comrades responded with a savage roar of their own and pushed forwards with them. Behind the bedlam of this weaving and battling frontline, Cadwy's officers Brast and Meyrug appeared at his side, and their savage looks were turned in an instant to ones of shocked concern.

"You're injured lord!" Brast pointed out seriously, grabbing some dressings from his pack and approaching Cadwy quickly. He expertly cleaned and bound up his wound in minutes, and their ebullience bolstered him as did their support. Cadwy grinned at both men from under the bloodied linen, which only just cleared his eyes.

"Better than clearing a ditch, eh gentlemen?" He asked them, and their tall and inspirational prince looked truly savage right then, his face streaked with his own blood and the gore of many fallen enemy, and with the lights of battle still gleaming terribly in his eyes, he was living up to his title challenge. Both officers nodded with wicked smiles of their own, Meyrug sporting a proper black eye and a purple lump on his head the size of a plum, but he did not seem too concerned. Cadwy put his hand on Meyrug's big shoulder and looked him in the one open eye.

"I shall never forget what you did today Meyrug ap Prys in the heroic rescue of my pencampwr!" He told him loudly, and to be heard over the colossal din. His bruised sergeant-major blushed to the roots, beginning to mumble something, but as usual Cadwy interrupted him. "Both of you. I knew there was something about the pair of you which interested me, and you have justified my belief in your worth today gentlemen!" He advised them both just as loudly, and Brast seemed on the point of commenting, but their focus was dragged instantly back to the battle just a few paces

from them, as the Romans had suddenly surged forwards once more. This furious bulge came to within feet of them, and the long iron point of a Roman javelin was thrust forward at Cadwy, but Brast's long sword flashed in a silvered blur and the Roman spear fell to the ground with a *thump* and a shrill scream, still clutched by the severed hand. Cadwy grinned wickedly again under the bloodied linen, and then he led his men back to the roaring and screaming madness before them.

The Romans' rear ranks had formed up properly now and were able to repel the Epidian cavalry more effectively, and this renewed their confidence somewhat and so they defended more strongly, screaming bloody murder. The brave spearmen of Selgofa clashed rowdily again with them, crashing against the long, oval and identical shields of Rome. This encounter was raised to another level in intensity and ferocity, and every few moments a man or a woman would fall to the ground with a shriek. This battle soon became one of pure and dire attrition, as men began heaving and cursing at their enemy behind their long oval shields, whilst the men and women facing them tried to strike over these tall shields with their claws, hammers and axes to kill them. The shorter swords had given the Brythons a measure of surprise and a small degree of parity, but any weapon is only as good as its owner, and the Romans had far more experience in their use. This was mitigated somewhat by the advantage of the *quills*, but they were no longer novel either. The Romans had adjusted from the necessity of survival and now watched closely for them. Other spearmen also stabbed upwards from both sides attempting the same, and neither side would give an inch. It seemed as though both sides would go down fighting to the last man and woman, and as Mars and Camulo wrestled among the twisting clouds in the heavens above, Cadwy knew this battle could still go either way. A sudden and thunderous shout came then from the northern treeline of this valley, and Cadwy's heart sank at the thought of being flanked by more Romans, or even the Gods deny enemy cavalry! However, his heart and his soul were both restored in the next instant and his aches just vanished. His battle spirit soared into the swirling heavens above whilst the hairs on his forearms and the nape of

his neck rose too at this stunning sight. He stood straighter, as this was only the second time in his young life that he had the honour and the privilege to witness rank after glorious rank of Prydein's most feared strike force take the field. These red-haired giants broke into this broad and burned clearing at a run and in their uniquely deadly, predatory manner. They carried no banner, as for them they required no introduction to any enemy. Their huge, cross-strapped and barrel chests swelled as they roared their savage battlecry in their own unique way of proud introduction and declared hostility. They drew their enormous battle axes as one, and their pale, murderous eyes came alive with a hard and terrible gleam.

"Gadwyr GrutArd! Gadwyr GrutArd! Gadwyr GrutArd!" Their guttural warcries shattered the animated sky above this desperate battlefield, and the ground trembled now under their enormous and fur clad feet. These tall and flame haired, ground devouring monsters of war had marched eight hundred miles to do battle here today, and the Albionau cheered their welcome to the fight loudly. Ironically considering their history, some of their cheers and cries of joy were tinged with an almost hysterical relief. These blue painted and incredibly muscled warriors of northern Galedon stormed across this stubble now at an electric pace, their double headed axes spinning and their long, plaited hair flaming behind them like torches. These huge and grinning warriors were almost sprinting when they smashed like a colossal iron hammer into the hurriedly adjusting right flank of the remaining Roman formations, and none who witnessed it would ever forget that bone crunching and deeply concussive sound they made on impact. When an unstoppable force meets an immovable object a dreadful collision must ensue, and by the immutable laws of this earth one of them must give. Roman armour gave this day, and at this deafening crash, long oval shields flew into the air like wicker chairs in an autumn gale. A number of polished helmets joined them in arcing spirals, many of which had the shocked looking heads still in them.

The Romans learned this day the hard way; they discovered the worth of Galedon's unmatched and gruesome dogs of war. Very few Roman soldiers had heard anything of mysterious Prittania, but some of the older veterans had heard the part-myth, part-legend of the *Gadwyre*. These rumoured mercenary giants from the wild and barbarous, northern wastelands of an unknown land had become Gaulish folklore, and who for anyone's gold were known to have killed many a Roman soldier in Gaul and elsewhere in this world. The almost mythical Gadwyre did this apparently with little effort, and their monstrous image had caused so many lasting nightmares among the few traumatised survivors of their encounters, they had never forgotten it. These were rare beasts, but not as rare as surviving witnesses, so most Roman soldiers had relegated their existence to legend and tall tale, or exaggerated rumour by the long haired Gauls. Many thought they were just Germanic mercenaries, but today those myths were dispelled once and for all. The presence here of these lifelong, professional killers; these rare and mysterious, mountaineering warriors from northernmost Prydein confirmed their existence here to these Romans and in the bloodiest way possible. Those outlandish rumours were proved to be a harsh and bitter truth to these horrified invaders as they watched these athletic, axe wielding leviathans disintegrate their front ranks like poor kindling. Roman morale collapsed as more of these huge and almost identical, flame haired and blue tattooed giants of unbridled savagery came pouring from the trees. They raced toward them at an unnerving speed, grinning like blood crazed and barbarian demons of an inconceivable size, and the confident, resurgent Roman formations of mere minutes earlier were shattered by these monstrous late arrivals. These once staunch bodies of men finally crumpled under the immense strength and the unrestrained ferocity of these huge limbed, terrifying warriors, and they just could not stand to such indefensible violence and such shocking power.

The auxiliary cohorts were the first to break, and these brown and olive-skinned conscripts ran for the trees, the coast and their lives, terrified beyond measure by these Godlike and fire haired monsters of absolute

carnage. A phalanx of war carbads from wild Wenyllon had been held in reserve among the trees, and they flashed from the opposite hillside flank of this valley in response to this rout. With a blazing '*wren perched on dagger in-hand*' cygil fastened to each side of their fighting platforms, Lleu *Llaw Gyffes*' noble warriors swept around this valley to contain these fleeing gelyn. Their privileged occupants shrieked and whooped with joy as they were finally released, and they shot downhill from the trees in pursuit of this fleeing enemy, causing a riotous cacophony of rattling and banging as they charged across this burned and bumpy field. Wenyllon's expert charioteers soon caught those dark-skinned Roman allies, and not one enemy soldier managed to escape King Lleu ap Rianaw's rolling, rattling cars of death. None survived the lovely long and curving blades which flashed out with such deadly accuracy from within, causing the gelyns' heads to fly up into the air in beautiful, red spraying and curving arcs and their still running bodies to crash to the earth in untidy heaps.

Cadwy surveyed the dead and the dying around him and realised that although the battlefield was littered with bodies, far fewer were Brythonic than Roman. With the timely arrival of Galan and then the Gadwyr they had prevailed. He realised suddenly that his grip on Lladdwyr-glaer was ferocious and so much so, his arm trembled, and his hand hurt terribly. It took him long and painful moments to force his fingers to relax and to slacken their grip on the hilt. Flexing his aching fingers, Cadwy looked around at this burnt battlefield, spotting the leading centurion who had been slain by Tŵyr ap Garth in the initial contact, and noticing too the other; Ioddo's cursed killer, who, with Camulo's grace he had thankfully killed himself. All their optios lay dead on this blood-soaked and littered ground, one of them spread eagled on the earth nearby in a huge pool of his own blood; Ioddo's accursed killer, and another of Cadwy's trophies from this life changing day. Long rows of enemy and allied soldiers lay dead all around him, heaped like animal carcasses on this forlorn battlefield and in sobering drifts. With the incredible ferocity of the Gadwyr, all hope had gone from the eyes of the few hundred remaining enemy soldiers, as they were cut off now by the cavalry and the chariots,

who had just slaughtered their auxiliaries like fleeing rats at the foot of this broad valley. These were circling them ominously now, and they knew their fate this day was sealed. Although their hard eyes were devoid of hope, there was still pride in them all and in their hearts, and it was clear that fire still burned in their foreign, Roman blood. There was still plenty of fight left in them all too, even as it was obviously their last. So, this battle ended as it had started with not one fighter prepared to surrender. The names Neleus, Agapitus, Carpus and Didacus would never be heard again on this hallowed ground, as all those brave soldiers had left this world. The remaining Romans stubbornly refused to yield, and so they forced the Gadwyr, their Galedonian compatriots and the Albionau to take each and every one of their lives, which they did, but at great cost. All except three were killed where they stood, fighting to the last stroke. These were druid chosen and so had to be clubbed into submission.

The stinking and burnt land of this farmstead was framed by vivid green and grassy ranks of softly rounded and shallow mounds. These were clearly ancient banks and ditches dug along three sides of the broad ground of this valley bottom long eons ago. Long before this farmstead and its crop fields had been established in this beautiful valley with the eye-catching allure of the distant ocean glinting in the sunlight southern vee, this had clearly been an ancient battlefield, and had it been further polluted this forlorn day by the reek of freshly spilled blood. Pools of it were beginning to congeal in the sun amid the familiar detritus of war on this scorched ground, along with the bleeding bodies of Brythons and these foreign transgressors alike. Enjoined and twisted bodies, looking like pairs of frozen lovers filled the rows of ancient and shallow ditches to one side of this blackened crop field, and these primeval defences after so many generations were once again strewn with the same dark produce of war. A long skirmish line of serious looking Selgofan and Damnonian spearmen passed through these entwined mounds of broken bodies, separating and assessing their own fallen then swiftly dispatching any enemy soldier who still clung tenuously to this world. The bridge of swords must surely have become crowded with the dead as the deceased

warriors of Prydain and Rome both blindly sought the next world, where the Romans immediately became slaves to the Brythonic victors who had so bravely fallen alongside them. Those three surviving Romans who were destined to be brought before the kings and the druids for interrogation were dragged away, inconsolable.

Amid complete and unfettered bedlam, Gŵyr Brith Fawr, King Galan and Crown Prince Cadwy embraced exhaustedly on this torn, body littered and blood clotted grass. To a great clamour of celebration from the surviving men and women of these two northern nations, the phrase 'old enemy' seemed long forgotten between them. Brith seemed to be propping the other two aristocratic gentlemen up somewhat. He did seem pleased however, as the people who were lucky enough to know him well knew also that the appalling grimace on his brutal, blood splattered face at that moment was his happy face.

Once the Brythonic injured and dead had been carried from this once again desecrated but now hallowed field, together, the Albionau and the Galedonau began to sing the 'Courage of Camulo'. To these valiant, ancient words they danced their triumph on this black, blood soaked, and body strewn field. Their great red God of war was sure to be beaming up at them from his temple in the Underworld, and as the rare and extempore blend of Brythonic and Roman blood seeped down through the cracks in the marble dome above him, he should be both honoured and sated.

The unrestrained Gadwyr had learned little from these contemptible foreigners, and so had chopped up those slain gelyn for their bloody trophies with an unconcealed glee. The Albionau and the Galedonau however had learned much to be admired about their enemy this long and bloody day of deadly examination. The Romans' courage and their abilities in battle were what impressed these victorious Brythons the most at battle's end, and the butcher's bill had put a sobering bluntness to the edge of their celebrations. They knew to a man and to a woman that it had been a close-run thing, and although they had prevailed, the stark

truth remained; that these intensely stubborn, well-trained and professional soldiers could have run amok through southern Prydain had there been enough of them and if they had brought supporting cavalry with them. The Brythons had kissed iron and had sent a prayer of thanks to their brif-druid and to their Gods for their vital interventions and for the Romans' crass oversight. As Galedon and Albion, united in victory roared their shared glory, all would admit that although Caesar was beyond any Brython's redemption, his soldiers were deeply impressive and became widely respected among these celebrating warriors. Their ingenuity, valour, audacity and their conspicuous bravery even to the last man standing would be talked about for generations to come in Prydain and will be until the end of days across this world. Crown Prince Cadwy ap Cridas of Selgofa and Albion had achieved his goal, securing the title of *Tywysog* and earning his eternal position in the lists; the *Brut y Brenhinoedd a Tywysogion o Prydain*. His countrymen were ecstatic on their return to camp and around their new and *confirmed* warlord, promising a very long and beery night ahead.



Chapter Seventeen.

The battle had raised such a din and a towering cloud of dust, Caesar's lookouts slung in the tops of his two tallest masts had heard and seen it from the beach. The general had realised immediately that it was the foraging cohorts of his 7th Legion which had clearly been caught and brought to battle somewhere nearby. Two of his remaining twelve precious horses and a couple of nervous scouts were sent out to investigate, and all eyes watched the careful advance of these riders across the incredibly noisy pebbles, waiting for the sudden barrage of iron tipped shafts and stones from the high treeline. None came however, and these two scouts plodded safely out of sight around the western approach, walking their horses through the stream bed to vanish up the creek.

Caesar had assembled a relief force and had it done surreptitiously, made up of a full cohort of legionaries from the tenth and a further cohort of auxiliaries in support. He personally gave their commanding centurion and his subordinate optio principalii strict orders about rash commitments. They were to beware of getting cut off above all else, as they were tasked to locate and investigate this battlefield and assess the action only. If it was possible to aid and to extract any of their comrades they could do so, but he did not want to throw good meat to the dogs along with the bad, and so their own safe return with intelligence was their priority. General Caesar made it absolutely clear that no suicidal heroics would be tolerated. Fearing spies, these chosen men had gathered their kit and weapons casually, seeming to move about aimlessly amongst each other and their general, who was deep in thought and seemed to be struggling with his endless frustration and his simmering anger. With a signal from one of those mounted scouts on the now empty cliff top, it became mercifully apparent that the way was clear. The clamour of distant

warfare had obviously cleared the high ridgeline and the beach approaches of all Prittans. Even their eagle-eyed lookouts had vanished as they had all been clearly drawn to the sounds of that great and unseen battle. There was no mistaking the place, as the tall and mushrooming cloud of dust it had thrown up lay just a short distance from this coast, and it was rising somewhere to the northwest of them. Caesar released these reinforcements then and his relief column carried out his orders to the letter, trotting over to the ridge in a crouched run before filing into the head of the ravine at the mouth of the stream, and they too disappeared from the beach up that narrow valley.

Half an hour later, this relief column marched around a hill behind their mounted officers to enter a long, flat and broad bottomed valley leading north away from the coast, and its facing hillsides were distant and thick with old pines. It was where they came across a scene of utter devastation at a burned-out farmstead at the heart of this valley floor. The terrible, almost unbelievable sight of their slaughtered men brought them up short. It was clear that none of their comrades were left alive on these burnt fields of stubble they had discovered. Their shattered bodies and their discarded equipment were strewn everywhere and looked as if they had been put through an enormous meat grinder. All dead enemy had obviously been collected, but Roman bodies remained, and evidence lay everywhere of this great and very recent, clearly cataclysmic defeat. Shields were smashed and splintered as were many spear shafts, and the bodies of their comrades lay everywhere in outrageous and shocking drifts. Hundreds and hundreds of broken, torn open and half naked Roman bodies littered that black and terrible ground. As buzzards circled this stinking and gore drenched valley floor from on high, they could see that it was littered with discarded leather foraging bags and looted, broken Roman figures. Empty caligae, torn tunics and bent armour plates lay everywhere each piece splashed with the blood of its vanquished owner, and it was a scene of complete horror. Gangs of woollen mantled Prittanic soldiers still looted the dead, whilst a barbaric and alien army of red-haired, axe swinging monsters of unbelievable size, who had obviously

torn their soldiers to shreds were now hacking the heads and the right hands off their comrades' bodies. This desecrated field was like a butcher's bloody nightmare, and this appalling scenario they had stumbled onto turned their Roman blood cold. Those huge and barbarous beasts who were still hacking at the dead bodies of their comrades with their huge axes turned toward them, and wintry smiles broke out on those broad and red-bearded faces when they spotted this enemy force. Those gigantic warriors formed up eagerly and into a loose formation however small in numbers, clearly preparing to charge these newcomers to the field no matter their number, and the soldiers in this large *relief* force began to fidget. Verus, the commanding centurion looked on aghast at this carnage, as some of the men he sought to save here were his own comrades. He was truly horrified to see almost two and a-half thousand men lost and ignobly hacked to pieces like carrion. The eagle and the banners of the legion were safe with Caesar along with the aquilifers of the 1st and the 7th, so there were no heroics required in that regard, and he was not about to risk a similar fate befalling him and his men, who were after all a much smaller force. With Caesar's warnings still ringing in his ears, Verus blew his shrill whistle and ordered an immediate about turn. This valiant relief force, now itself under threat of a similar unholy annihilation raced back to their beachhead camp, pursued madly by hundreds of those monstrous and almost uncontrollably ferocious, flame haired warriors who the Romans now came to fear completely. They only just managed to gain the beach and achieve the safety of their barricade before the terrifying speed of those hugely muscled and super fit warriors cut them off. As this once proud relief force scrabbled across the pebbles for the sanctuary of their great timber bastion, the libritors on the *heavy* in the shallows scrambled for their weapons. These huge and almost identical barbarian tribesmen lined up just out of ballista shot at the river valley however and they laughed uproariously at the Romans' terrified retreat. They gesticulated and insulted them loudly with guttural and unknown words, but their ridicule was clear; for running away and for cowering behind their barricade and their artillery. Each massive and red-

haired warrior had a pair of hacked off Roman heads hung around his broad neck, and a few sported long and bloody necklaces of threaded right hands. These blue swirled and blood splattered warriors raised their axes then and raised too their gruff voices in glorious celebration, and their alien, indecipherable chanting carried powerfully down this beach. It washed over these fearful Romans sheltering behind their shields and the battered remnants of their barricade.

“Bythoog GrootArd! Bythoog GrootArd! Bythoog GrootArd!” They roared their victory in their guttural rumbling before melting away up the ravine, laughing, comparing trophies and clapping each other soundly on their broad and deeply muscled backs.

After a long and tedious day, consisting of a *dry* and incessant rain of arrows and river pebbles, Caesar’s soldiers brooded over the loss of so many of their men. The way they had died and the gigantic, unearthly monsters who had slaughtered them preyed on their minds and haunted their nightmares. They suffered too from the loss of any food those men may have carried, and their morale was now at a dangerously low ebb. This new dawn with its withering light had showed them how short their supplies had become, and even on strict rations they had about two days of food left and very little potable water, now the stream was once more an extremely dangerous place to visit. No emissaries or words had been necessary from the Prittans, as their missiles had conveyed their dire message admirably, that since the Romans’ failed foraging adventure, water was no longer free to them. The Prittans no longer kept up a constant barrage of missiles however as they must have tired of it eventually, and the ridgeline became largely deserted for long parts of the day. This allowed small parties to take a chance at a run to the stream, and to fill as many amphorae with water as possible before lugging them back with a lung busting run across these deep, energy sapping pebbles. Two parties had been allowed to cross the beach nervously to no opposition this morning, and they had fallen to their knees in the low outflow of that little stream and had pressed their amphorae into the

gravel. There, they had hurriedly filled their tall pots, wishing to their Gods no doubt that they had wider mouths, their eyes darting up the lanes and the hillside approaches to their left and up that narrow river valley ahead of them constantly, but the casual arrival of the Prittans was done swiftly enough to entrap them. They realised that they had been lulled out into the open, and they died screaming on that gravel bed of cool and fresh water, battered by pebbles or festooned with brightly fletched arrows, and the cloud of their mixed blood was soon washed swiftly out to sea. Apart from the odd occasion when a few local teenagers would appear randomly between the trees on the hill, obviously to take a few pot shots at them before running home for their dinner, the ridgeline would look deserted. It was entirely deceptive, as any moment the black, needle like arrows of the Prittans could cloud the sky from behind it. The avalanche of incoming shot would restart, and Roman screaming would resume. One of Caesar's best archers had put an arrow right into the forehead of a young boy of around twelve summers old the day before, and to great celebration. The boy had been showing his younger brother how to throw a slingshot at the bad Roman invaders, and the *smack* of the arrow cleaving into his skull was heard clearly from the beachhead. The smallest boy had been struck slack-jawed by this tragedy, and his round face had showed all the horror as he watched with huge eyes his big brother kicking on the rocky ground at his feet, a foreign arrow shot clean through his head. A huge cheer had erupted from the Roman beachhead at this fine shot, and even the general had applauded, throwing the man a bronze torque for his fine shot. The trees and the ground around that stricken younger brother on the ridgeline had suddenly sprouted arrows, as more archers vied for their general's praises. That little boy had showed no fear at this deadly onslaught however, and his tragic face had turned to a white and tearless mask of young outrage as the arrows whizzed just inches past him. After a long, hate filled stare at them, that fearless Prittanic child had turned untouched amid the maelstrom of steel tipped rods and had calmly vanished from sight. This had unnerved the superstitious among these Romans which had always been the majority, and their mood had

changed then, soured by the bad omen of a lifelong and incredibly courageous new enemy regardless of his age. Their hunger, their thirst and their pent-up frustrations all added to this dip in their morale, and as is common in tight companies of beleaguered military men, it began to show. The approaches would remain mercifully clear, but any sign of them forming up on this beach again would alarm their hidden lookouts and it would bring the Prittans back running. The mouth of the small river valley would become crowded with warriors once more and the hillside behind them would quickly fill with their archers and slingers, as would the ridgeline overlooking this deadly beach. Over-the-top shooting would be paused as their best shooters took to the ridgeline for direct archery, and the air would become thick with their projectiles again.

Around noon, emissaries were grudgingly sent out across the pebbles by Caesar with false promises of no further breakouts, and another ceasefire was tentatively agreed, on condition that further work on the barricade ceased and that they worked solely on repairing their ships. This Caesar agreed to, and the Prittans once more gave him access to fresh water and on this occasion, even allowed small foraging parties to operate but only in a strictly controlled area. This newly agreed routine continued throughout the day and the Romans' seemed to settle into this rhythm, glad of the fresh water, the woodland fruits, the wild mushrooms and the nuts now available to them, but the lack of incoming missiles was the most welcome change. They seemed content to wait and to lick their wounds, but with the odd glance stolen across to the southern horizon every now and again.

From dawn the following day, and their last day here according to the Prittans, these men were kept busy by their officers, making all the necessary repairs to their fleet and to their kit, but all knew they were being watched continually by their enemy as they prepared to leave this punishing beach and this wildly hostile land.

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Rotating companies of Brythonic warriors and scouts kept a constant vigil on those Roman invaders from these high cliff tops. The Romans could collect fresh water from the nearby stream again and could now forage in a small sector of adjacent woodland with impunity, but they were under constant surveillance, as was their now huge timber barricade on the beach below. Following two days of almost continuous repairs to their ships, and on the 22nd day of Eiddew, which those Romans called their 30th day of Quintillus, they were running out of time. Brigades of Brythonic archers were being assembled all along this coast sharing dozens of braziers, and thousands of fire arrows had been crafted for them, all in preparation for the great *glanhau* at midnight tonight, decreed by HênDdu himself. It would be these bold Romans' last night here, and it would be the sacred and long-awaited time when those Romans would be forcibly 'purged' from Prydein's hallowed shores by Bel's holy fire and driven back into the sea by these outraged Brythons.

In the early part of this bright but blustery afternoon, a few shouts came from a scout on the highest peak of these cliffs, but as the wind was stiff and swirling, no one heard him for many minutes. When his panicked yells and wild gesticulations were eventually noticed, it was clear to all what had caused that lookout such consternation, as a fleet of ships had appeared as a row of tiny dots cresting the distant horizon. People rushed to the cliffs in alarm, as incredibly, the rumoured cavalry transports of the enemy had actually appeared in the channel, causing an explosion of celebration below on the beach. As those dark and distant smudges multiplied, grew and solidified into a huge Roman fleet of reinforcement, the Brythons became enraged. It was now clear to all that the duplicitous wolf of Rome planned to break yet another promise and had sent for reinforcements, having no intention of withdrawing. This high headland flooded with angry nobles and warriors alike to watch these ships materialise fully and to sail toward them on the leaden sea below. The roar from the beachhead told its own tale, reaching clearly to the shocked Brythons on these white cliffs and carried up to them on the sea breeze. Their shouts were tight with relief and loud with celebration, and those

delighted Romans cheered the appearance of their clearly expected transports with great gusto. The most enormous ships ever seen in Prydein, each crammed with hundreds of armoured soldiers and horses sailed boldly in from the grey waves of the channel and drew up in the calm blue waters of the bay below. This fleet of eighteen gigantic ships dropped their anchors to wild cheering and shouts of welcome from the other ships in the bay and the penned force on the beach. A boat was lowered from the lead ship of this newly arrived fleet, and a number of Roman officers were seen to be rowed across to meet with Caesar perhaps on his flagship. This caused a great consternation among these furious Brythons on Caint's tall cliffs, as if that huge, mounted force was allowed to land in the bay below, Caesar's forces would be complete. They would be a far more effective and dangerous enemy from that moment, allowing them to break out from their containment and to wreak havoc on the lands of Caint and who knew where else. This clear and immediate threat to the Brythons was not just the military might of Caesar should he breakout inland as the threat of allied capitulation was a serious one, and any 'suing for terms' from certain *weaker* tribes would undermine the political will to resist these Romans, and it would most certainly impact their ability to proceed with this defensive war. As the military rulers of Prydein responded to this calamitous event, calling for an emergency war council in their headquarters camp a mile distant, King Ederus was heard to roar out for his confiscated sacks of Iweriuan caltrops.

At the same time, the druids held their own council at the head of these cliffs, and amid hundreds of matching long gowns of pure white linen, HênDdu declared to his animated order that he would deal with those cavalry ships himself. Drawing around him his three arch-druids, these four senior priests of Prydein moved to stand near the crumbling, chalky edge of these high clifftops. From there, HênDdu stared down at these new arrivals for long moments, looking gravely down his long nose at this massive, enjoined fleet of more than a hundred huge ships rising and falling gently on the waves below, and which together now presented a very real and dire threat to the proud and noble people of this ancient and

sacred country under his care. They were *his* people who were threatened by these bold invaders, and so AurArian *Aruchel* glowered bleakly down at those joyful Romans in their ships and on those pebbles in the bay far below until he had seen enough, and with a nod to his three subordinates, he turned to his duty with a vengeful and terrifying look now on his long and angular face.

The massed arch-druids and druidens of all Prydein; three hundred and thirty-three of the most powerful priests from across this land formed an enormous circle around HênDdu, on the very pinnacle of these cliffs and by linking their hands tightly together. The brif-druid was silent and rigid for long moments in the centre of this sacred circle of holy ministers, drawing their power into him and building his inner rage. On the highest hill of these swooping and dazzling cliffs, this tall and infamous druid looked pale, but his drawn face reflected his barely controlled outrage as his three assistants came to stand solemnly behind him in close support. HênDdu's noble head came up then, and his face hardened as he turned deliberately to the east, beginning to take a series of deep breaths and filling his chest. He drew huge volumes of air into his lungs and expelled them forcibly, lifting his arms and holding them out wide whilst Einion, Guron and Drem called out the profound and long forgotten words behind him, loudly and in the three sacred voices of power. HênDdu was demonstrating to his beloved God Lug precisely what he desired of him, and he blew another volley of these massive and powerful breaths toward the east in a series of huge 'whooshes.' His cheeks ballooned to accommodate them, and his lips vibrated as behind him his three senior druids incanted the dread and archaic words of the long dead. This enormous gathering of priests was now facing the lovely blue skies over the German ocean, and these enjoined druids and druidens held their arms wide in holy and earnest supplication and in indefectible support of their principal. This white gowned and tonsured or mistletoe adorned circle of over three hundred arch-druids and druidens then joined in with this litany, and a multitude of sonorous and sanctified voices began to grow, to twist and to meld together. This vocal amalgam grew alarmingly,

and it rose up to the heavens powerfully, spiralling eastwards and calling to their dark lord across the eternal chasm. The light in that blue sky to the east seemed to glimmer briefly then, and many on these cliffs who were looking that way were not even sure they had seen anything. As this holy and harmonised sound strengthened and continued its outpouring without pause, it emanated powerfully as one undeniable and thundering voice from the highest of these cliffs. As this charged singing spiralled up and eastward in an atmosphere which was suddenly fraught all across this broad and elevated maes, the light in the heavens flickered again, and many wide Brythonic eyes were drawn to this astonishing tremor in the far eastern atmosphere. They all saw the light drop noticeably then over that far distant sea, and these stunned Brythons stood rooted. As the blessed and beautiful singing continued powerfully all around them, these watching people noted too that the low and blue, eastern horizon had suddenly darkened to violet in these apprehensive moments. Then it deepened to a looming and humping damson with a terrifying speed as they watched, and these thousands of onlookers stood enthralled from the tops of these white cliffs and as their enjoined priests laboured valiantly on the elevated heath behind and above them.

It took the absolute maximum, pin-sharp and most acute concentration humanly possible, and it took a monstrous effort from every fibre of their beings to conjure up this great storm their people so desperately needed, yet it seemed to be working. HênDdu's granite face was ashen and sweat ran from him in rivulets as he trembled violently now from head to foot with the colossal effort required; his mind a honed and dazzling edge of indefectible will. Feeling the spiritual support of his surrounding brother and sisterhood flow powerfully into him, he heaved, he blew, and he conjured the mythical rhag '*Chwyth Lug*,' the formidable 'Breath of Lug' spell, which represented the very pinnacle of this prime druid's immense powers. This legendary brif-druid was considered in whispers to be the last man in Prydein and perhaps the world to possess this immense power. His esoteric influence here today was essential if they were to successfully enjoin the all-powerful and terrifying Dark Lord to their aid,

and to the aid of their now desperately beleaguered people. AurArian *Aruchel* confirmed those whispered conjectures today and in the most awe-inspiring way, as inexplicably he bellowed vast volumes of air toward the glowering east, and the birds in the air were driven from these awesome blasts in startled flocks.

Somewhere, deep in the recesses of his subconscious mind this all-powerful druid was buoyed and gratified by the first tremor of the responding air as it caressed his cheeks and stirred his grey hair. His long nostrils twitched, identifying the rank and unmistakeable but minute preceding motes of this monstrous power he was unleashing. As this prime-druid blew his *rheg* with every ounce of his physical and spiritual strength and supported by the holiest men and women in the country, more strange and animated clouds began to form and to rise in the east, and these were of a stygian density. This unholy darkness seemed to rise ominously upwards from under the eastern horizon like a black beast, uncoiling itself from the Underworld. This rising, towering blackness was growing in size, and alarmingly but silently billowing into the heavens with an alien, metallic-yellow hue staining the damson, almost black fringes. Encouraged, this omnipotent druid held his arms wide and blew yet another enormous volley to the east in a plea to Arglwydd Lug, his awesome and vibrating voice then suddenly roaring out massively behind it.

‘LUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUG!’

The world’s most powerful druid unleashed all of his mighty energy then in a savage, spiritual and arcane blast, and his incomprehensible power poured forth and stirred the elements in this unique way, perhaps for the first time in many generations. HênDdu’s deafening and ear-splitting roar rolled out over the onlookers on these cliffs, making them duck in fear. Then it boomed out across the sea, rising to the eastern heavens as Einion, Guron and Drem incanted the dark and final, primordial utterances behind him. Together, this wide circle of three hundred and thirty-three priests and priestesses surrounding them ended their litany of harmonised

song to further assist their prime druid, still clutching each other's hands among the churning but unseen maelstrom of ancient spiritual forces gathering and swirling powerfully around them. These venerable ministers joined their master to call this vast and towering anvil of doom toward them.

'LUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUG!'

Hundreds of sanctified voices spiralled upwards to the east, climbing and building until it became one singular, holy detonation. Supported by the harmonised singing of many hundreds of assembled bards, and the silent prayers of almost as many uati and all the werrin of Prydein, this magically amplified blend of sacred voices burst forth, and it penetrated the very souls of all who watched and listened agog.

'LUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUG!'

Held sharp and clear in HênDdu's mind, the image of the dark lord in his subterranean vault opening one red and baleful eye at this vibration in the ether was a real one. The druids' cunning spell washed its ancient, sibilant words over him, and Lug sat up in his bone throne of squirming horror. As duty was all, Arglwydd Lug Ddu opened his lean, dark and sinewy arms to HênDdu, acceded to the druids' respectful entreaties high above him and he inhaled; deeply.

This mushrooming pollution above the distant horizon seemed to pause then and recoil somewhat as if the entire world held its breath. Life itself seemed to teeter on the very edge of some unseen and unknown chasm in the eternal void for long and superstitious, hair-raising moments. Then Lug exhaled massively in patriotic response to Prydein's druidry, and *His* great storm was finally loosed, exploding softly and silently upwards like a black, living nightmare. It was expelled upward and toward Caint from below that distant and deeply disturbed eastern horizon now with an extreme violence, coming straight from *His* abysmal and lifeless Underworld. This sudden storm ballooned upwards, gathering pace and expanding alarmingly once released, and it loomed darkly now as it

approached, sprawling over the leaden ocean beneath it and covering it with a vast and nightlike shadow. Heading directly for those who had called it forth from the eternal blackness, the sea rose in great alarm ahead of this rare storm of such pure rage, humping as it was forced westward through the narrowing constraints of the channel. Its attendant wind was whipped into swirling, screeching vortices at the behest of the Dark Lord, and *His* powerful, animated breath rushed west like an unholy and deadly curse. Scoured and goaded into an apocalyptic fury by the primeval and unknowable words of Prydein's druids, this storm howled toward them with a demonic intensity unseen anywhere in generations. With a force born of Godly vengeance, *His* monstrous tempest arrived at the coast of Caint like the end of the world.

The rearing, dark-green waves which fled from this sacrilegious maelstrom assaulted the cavalry fleet moored in the bay below and the main fleet it had joined with an unbelievable fury. Roman celebrations quickly turned to cries of woe and yells of despair below in the bay, and the enemy crouching in their suddenly canting ships threw their arms over their heads in absolute terror as the most terrifying spectacle now bore down on them. Day turned to night behind and above them, and the sea seemed to swell angrily and rise up beneath them, lifting these massive ships into the air like corks. In another heartbeat, the wind slammed into them like an immense and invisible battering ram, bringing with it a terrifying noise and stripping the sails and rigging from their masts to shreds in seconds. It suddenly sounded like the cries of thousands of tortured ravens in the shrieking air around them, and this powerful, whipcracking wind had the strength to bowl a careless person off his feet and clean overboard. Caesar's long and beautifully crafted bireme reared on a huge, froth-topped wave amid this growing bedlam, with its bronze wrapped bow ram reaching high into the air before it showed its barnacle encrusted bottom and heeled over. Both banks of slender oars were smashed away as it turned turtle, broke its back amidships and then vanished in a huge grey swirl, the great perpendicular bronze ram the last thing to sink and to vanish. The stunned Brythons on these cliffs prayed

that the Roman rogue was on it when it sunk, and they had to hold onto each other tightly now as this spirit borne gale whipped around them, but its immense power seemed to be concentrated in the channel and the bay below and they were merely buffeted by its wildly churning extremities. They watched in awe as HênDdu's 'Breath of Lug' spell ripped up the Romans' moorings as if they were tethered with thread, and then it scattered their huge ships on its climbing and malevolent waves, making the men and horses within them scream in terror. Many were killed in that tumbling and petrifying chaos of equipment, panicking men and thrashing animals, but the thousands of eyes watching all along these cliffs were hard and they were expressionless. The thunderhead arrived then in spectacular style, and the brilliant Lord Fwlch's vengeance came with it. It crackled over all those screaming Romans with its malevolent, yellow-stained fury, and the speedy Lord Fwlch was at the Dark Lord's right-hand in support, and as the tardy Lord Taranu was awoken by these elemental flashes, they lit up the whole sky with a great and ominous warning from Prydein's terrible weather Gods. Great timber ships teetered on mountains of wet, heaving green as vicious bolts of divine lightning exploded into the lifting seas around them, seeking them out and filling the air with the stench of their foul and corrupted ozone. The swooping gunwales of those ships were lined with pale and horrified faces as this monstrous storm kept building and building without let or pause along with Roman terror, and their panic must have been immense. They clung to those shuddering timbers and to each other, and many of their vessels collided with each other in that tempestuous bay below, being quickly overcome by these abruptly extreme conditions and vanishing without trace under that terrifying and heaving, grey-green turbulence. Lord Fwlch lit the vista again in his supportive anger, and *His* lightning cracked into those Romans, thrashing them with jagged forks of *His* terrifying power before Lord Taranu ravaged them and boomed *His* own deafening threats down onto them all. Three of those ships took direct hits from these formidable bolts of furious electricity, and they exploded violently, blown to smithereens. Little was left of these massive, unlucky transports but a

flotsam of rags, splintered timber spars and a considerable number of singed bodies, all lifelessly rising and falling on this wildly livid and angry ocean. The foul remains of an electric stench was left in this unique lightning's shocking wake, and it made a sobering scene, even to the Brythons on these cliffs.

The indefensible *Chwyth Lug* had sunk more than half of that foreign fleet, scouring and flushing the channel of everything and forcing any survivors away from this coast, which was suddenly and inexplicably trying to kill all those Romans. They tried desperately to escape this unholy terror, steering their surviving ships into the safety of the now suddenly welcoming waters of the channel, but increasingly more of their fleet was caught up in the swirling, whirlpool maelstrom of this bay transformed. They succumbed to this violently overpowered tempest with little defence, as their customisation and overloading had massively compromised their buoyancy. As those huge timber vessels swooped down these mountainous green slopes with their rows of pale faces glowing in this unnatural gloom and clearly expressing the knowledge of their impending doom, they had no hope of recovery in the troughs of these gigantic waves and merely plunged bow first into the ocean. Those same bows on the *heavies* were weighed down by three-span artillery pieces bolted to their timbers, so when they too tried to turn and to escape into the channel, their deep bellies filled in moments, and they too vanished with a chorus of faint screams and one enormous gurgle. This unrelenting, deeply vengeful storm forced the few survivors further offshore, and they had no alternative but to go with it if they did not want to join their compatriots in the cold depths. A pale and clearly shaken Quaestor Cassius Longinus ordered his captains to turn fully with this spiteful, malicious wind and to head back the way they had come. They fled into the channel, pursued by the fury of Prydein's implacable *Black God*, and they sailed raggedly south, back to Gaul in abject failure. Longinus' vaunted cavalry would play no part in Caesar's rash and poorly considered foray, as it had not even made land. Nor would almost three-quarters of the general's invasion fleet, as the furious, seaweed strewn and thrashing

water of this bay was festooned with the tops of its masts. This was all that was visible of over forty ships in his once proud fleet, but many had sunk further out, past an unseen shelf in the submerged bedrock, and they had slid much, much deeper and with all hands still aboard.

Fortuitously perhaps, this druid made gale had coincided perfectly with the turning of the tide, but more vitally it had chimed precisely with last night's full moon, and which coincidentally had been the final and full flowering in the moon's nineteen-year cycle. It was this long-awaited zenith which had caused an exceptionally high tide this day, and which had joined by chance perhaps with a tremendous flash storm of coincidence to cause such astonishing and focused mayhem. Or perhaps the devastation below had been brought on by holy supplication, it was difficult to tell. However, alloyed to the ancient magic of Prydein's druids, its shocking power had been revealed below to these watching wide-eyed Brythons, and the remnants of many of Caesar's ships were now floating in pieces or wrecked on the beach far below them. Those grounded warships were filling with water as they watched and were being pounded by the thumping waves, the booming sounds of which could be heard from these cliff tops. It was clear from this vaunted viewpoint that many other ships in Caesar's fleet had been rendered unseaworthy by the loss of sails, rigging, masts and other vital equipment, and most of those still afloat struggled for control, milling aimlessly about the livid waters of the bay, rising and falling on its still towering and moving, blue-green hills with little or no control. The ragged and wind blasted Brythons looking down were overjoyed, and they danced on this elevated grass in their thousands, hoping that this Gods-blessed catastrophe threatened the Roman's very existence. Their beachhead below was in a complete uproar, with soldiers running here and there, and with long lines of men attempting to rescue their floundering comrades in the thundering surf, but most were beyond their help and had drowned fully armoured and in their hundreds. Some of their bodies now began to be lifted and smashed onto those pebbles below by the massive rollers crashing to the beach, as in all senses the tide had turned.

Soon there was a long drift line of undulating and shifting bodies rudely mixing with the torn seaweed and the smashed timber flotsam, all rolling and nudging each other on that wet crescent of pebbles below, which was slowly being abandoned now by the retreating sea. Even as the great storm abated and the sea began to calm, this rolling rill of death was forming all along the curling white surfline below. The whole sweeping length of that dark pebble beach glittered now with the moving and polished plates of Roman armour, interspersed with glossy fronds of living green and dark drapes of wet maroon wool. Dozens of bodies, the un-armoured ones that floated and thousands of pieces of smashed timber which had escaped the magnetic draw of the pebbles were floating away now, out to the grey lumpen waters of the channel. The Romans' camp and beachhead had been virtually destroyed, and the surviving officers had all vanished into the largest ship, which itself was awash now and aground on the beach. No doubt they were assembling to form a council with their remaining officers and their general if he had survived, and his dazed men began to hastily rebuild their sorry looking barricade on the pebbles far below as this wild storm blew out to sea in great swirling gales.

Someone in authority had finally snapped out of the astonished and stunned silence on these cliffs which had captured all these thousands of wide eyed Brythons in its thrall. Some orders were hurriedly issued as this unnatural storm exhausted itself over the channel and to the west of them. Within moments, the archers and slingers were forming up again between the trees below the ridgeline, behind and out of sight of their targets on the beach. With no mercy whatsoever and in a cold heartbeat, uncountable stones and arrows arced upwards in black clouds into a clearing sky, to plummet onto Roman armour and onto Roman heads once more. The ones that found their marks began to break and to pierce Roman flesh again, and ultimately, these Brythonic archers and slingers were informing these defeated invaders effectively, directly, and with kinetics that the ceasefire was officially over.

HênDdu was utterly exhausted by his efforts and had collapsed to the grass on this cliff, quickly falling into a deep unconsciousness. He was rushed away to the druiden pavilions for treatment and to recover, followed by a veritable flock of dancing, jubilant white gowned priests and priestesses.

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Under unceasing observation and a constant rain of missiles, the Romans began repairing their few surviving ships and their shattered beachhead with what tools and materials they had to hand. They had to do this with what they could reach without being pierced by an arrow or getting the backs of their skulls caved in by a slinger's rock. The soldiers frantically helped their surviving engineer immunes patch up their timber barricade, whilst watchful comrades held scutum over their heads in protection. Much of the material they used was made up of the fragmented timbers of their shattered ships whose remnants still littered the tideline all along these pebbles. This splintered flotsam had been shared by the hundreds of pale bodies of their fallen comrades, which had nudged each other rudely in the shallows or rolled ungraciously at water's edge for hours until these chastened men had reclaimed them. Under a constant, withering attack from slingers and archers, permanently invisible behind the ridgeline and who had an inexhaustible supply of ammunition, these surviving soldiers struggled to stay alive. They did this whilst making essential repairs to their barricade, which had been flared and carried down to the surfline since their day of landing, and this valuable addition, constructed solely for that opposed landing now allowed them to gather their dead and to make essential repairs to their precious ships in these shallows and in some small measure of safety. Although far from ideal, the beach itself had been a handy reserve from which a hand-picked selection of its larger and rounder pebbles could be used in their smaller artillery pieces, but the storm had destroyed both their other heavies. On the one remaining heavy now used for shelter, officer's meetings and to treat the wounded, its large deck mounted weapons had been put out of

action, so apart from throwing these beach pebbles at the Prittans in desperation, they no longer represented an endless supply of ammunition to the libritors. The dart firing scorpion on the bow needed some structural repairs before it would be ready, but the immunes were working hard to repair this and the vital bestia aboard the new flagship, so the heavier of these beach pebbles would once again prove useful. However, this ballista was mounted on the stern, and operational or not, it was not much use to them at the moment. The small and finely matched, *incoming* slingstones on the other hand seemed to be in unending supply to the Prittans, and these murderous, buzzing projectiles were a constant and deadly harassment, along with the barbed and fletched demons which continually bristled their timbers with a *thunk!* Every now and again, an arrow would *snick* through a gap in these timbers or between two shields, to ricochet harmlessly off these cold pebbles or to cruelly maim someone, or it would claim another life. Another man would then fall to this stretch of Kantion, gushing his lifeblood and all his hopes and dreams onto the cold stones of this alien, ancient country. This unfortunate would then place another indelible mark on the butcher's bill of Rome and would in turn, add to the sum total of Caesar's folly.

The much-cursed ridgeline was mercifully quiet this evening, and the shoreline bastion was lit by a large bonfire, causing millions of miniature dancing shadows to cavort across the entire dark and dimpled surface of this beach. It was dwarfed by the great funeral pyre at the eastern end of this bay and below the great headland. That roiling blaze hurled dense coils of heavy black smoke into the night sky as it consumed the Roman dead, finally reclaimed from these wet pebbles. No more than a few hundred men lay around this smaller campfire near the barricade, whilst the remainder of their men were aboard the surviving vessels attempting hurried repairs or sleeping, depending on their shift. All were subdued and sullen, but all were sure now at least that their Prittanic campaign was at an end. Mamurra and the surviving immunes were taking advantage of the men's downtime to work on repairing what ships remained from the devastation, and every enlisted man here with a pulse yearned to leave

this cursed coastline far behind him. The lookouts at the wings of this patched and much repaired barricade stirred, drawing the attention of the resting soldiers closest to them. Many heads turned to see the approach of a Macedonian scout who came in at a crouched run. Behind him came several Prittanic tribesmen in their woollen cloaks and trews, long braided hair and their drooping, voluminous moustaches. This delegation was eyed with intense suspicion by all these Romans as they were led into the bowels of Caesar's heavy ship of office, grounded as it was still on these pebbles. None of these beleaguered and deflated Romans around this campfire would have perceived the subtle differences in their visitors' dress, which would have marked them out as Belgic nobility to a local. In the strictest secrecy, the few surviving rebel leaders of the disaffected and displaced Belgic tribes, along with the nobles of northern Trinovanta and the Houses of the recently overthrown Prittanic Atrebatas had, in alliance, sent these five emissaries to meet with Caesar.

Once these clandestine visitors had been brought under the damp, dripping timbers of the ship's hull by a dazzling centurion, they were met by Caesar, Labienus and King Commios, who seemed gratified by their deep and formal bows to him, and their congratulations on Caesar's surprising survival drew a wry grin from the general. Caesar narrowed his eyes at this obvious display of respect and due honour to Commios, but passed no remark as he invited them to sit around his great timber desk. It took these Belgic nobles a little over an hour to bring the general up to date with all the developments in southern Prittanica. Caesar had rested his chin on his right thumb with his index finger pressed against his upper lip throughout the briefing, nodding here and there as Commios interpreted the strange dialect for the two Roman officers. The general remained impassive as Commios spoke of the Prittan's purge in the Trinovantan and Belgic territories to their northeast and which are now lost to these leaders. Their strongholds were overwhelmed as the Prittans had taken their territories by force in a surprise overnight operation. Commios became a little flustered at the news of his Atrebatas remaining a resolute enemy to Rome, suspecting perhaps that his usefulness to the

great general had been thus reduced. Caesar passed no comment, but his narrowed eyes glittered as he signalled them to continue. These Belgic nobles went on to confirm that the Rheginenses to their immediate west and north also remained steadfastly allied to the Pritans, and that in light of all these intelligences, they clearly expected Caesar to be leaving on the soonest suitable tide once his ships were repaired. Surprisingly, they pleaded to be taken with him to Gaul, as there was nowhere left for them to go in this country in their combined and gloomy opinions. They learned a little about the Roman general then, as he made it clear to them that he had no intention of leaving just yet. These surprised Belgic nobles had a brief discussion amongst themselves at this startling news, their heads pressed together into a tight circle. In a few moments they had come to a decision, and they presented Caesar with an alternative that they were going to propose to him before the great storm had destroyed most of his fleet. They offered him assistance from a group of associated Belgic tribes to the east, his only remaining route to safety and with whom they had recently visited. These minor tribes had gained independence only recently, and apparently had no great alliance with the Pritans, and Caesar's visitors described the lay and topography of a land beyond the nearby enemy headland which towered over the smoke wreathed, eastern end of this shoreline of Kant or Kantion depending on who you asked. If the Romans could escape this beach and follow their suggested route closely, they would arrive at the great Vale of Kantion, and there, they will only have two real fortresses to deal with, and possibly without siege and with free passage from there over the Tamesa if gold was forthcoming. Caesar and Labienus both sat up a little straighter when Commios began to describe a broad, flat plain of land around the chief of these fortresses, from where the dominant but coin poor King Cingetorix ruled, and where Caesar could array all his forces if he chose to. In these barbarians' considered opinions, the other minor kings of Kantion could not agree on it being morning or afternoon, and would never become allies, so they would not present Caesar with any real opposition should he desire to cross their lands if they were paid in metal. Also in their opinion, Commios

was regarded as a respected Belgic king who could still prove useful in this regard, delivering the coin perhaps and making sure they posed no obstruction to Caesar crossing the plain of Kantion. One of these visitors removed his hood then and revealed himself fully for the first time, claiming a kingship of his own. Revealing a gold torque at his throat and black teeth in his mouth, he claimed too that it was he who was offering them sanctuary in the high north of Trinovanta. Commios greeted the man as an old friend, confirming this careful man's identity and introducing him as one King Clued Danti, who had come to offer the use of his 'Karrs' as he called his strongholds in far northern Trinovanta, and where, so far, he had escaped King Avarway's purging pogrom. For an agreed sum in gold, this Belgic King Clued stated that he could give them a safe route around the allied forces and accommodate all his army for a brief period of time in his lands, but only if they helped him reclaim his far northern, home territories. These lay over a major river boundary known as their *Avon Gryffstour*, or a remarkably similar, difficult to pronounce name, and their route there would be lightly guarded if this man was to be believed. From his description, these inaccessible tracts and plateaus which made up Clued Danti's lands were wilder and more densely forested, and Caesar's army would be much safer there. His minor kingdom lay close to this rugged coast, but much further northeast and beyond the reach of most Brythonic Houses. On his northern border with a clan called the Icenii, who's leaders were mostly absent as they were here in Caint honouring their commitments of alliance, this Clued Danti informed Caesar that he and his legions could consolidate and reinforce there. From this odious and black toothed king's eastern coast, they could resupply with ease via his harbours and his ample wharfing on the great German Sea, and there they could build a great fortress of their own if they chose to. The two Patricians looked at each other for a brief moment at this offer, before Labienus turned back to them, smiled thinly and nodded for Commios to continue.

Caesar's opportunity became clear to Labienus, but neither his officers or any of their enlisted men had any appreciation of the steps Caesar would

take to prevent his return to Gaul in ignominious defeat and be forced to face the subsequent clamour for his head in Rome. 'If there was a slim chance of achieving the stunning outcome proposed by these odious Belgic barbarians, was he prepared to throw Fortuna's dice one more time in its pursuit and risk all, perhaps for the last time?' This question was clear on Labienus' inscrutable face as he studied his general deep in thought, but the wry smile returned, as he knew precisely what was going through his general's busy mind at that moment and he was certain too of the outcome. His thought processes mirrored those of Caesar of that he was sure, and as that blustering fool Commios continued with his interpretation of this rotten mouthed creature's incoherent babbling, it became clear that they could escape this cursed beachhead after all. Should they achieve this risky breakout proposed by these stinking barbarians and then follow this rugged coastal route to the east, they could turn north across the lands of this Kantion at the correct place given up by these grubby and hideously dressed, barbaric individuals. Once through that great vale and taking the correctly identified route, the southwestern bank of their biggest river estuary, which the locals call their Avon Tavyus or the Tamesa depending on the dialect would be open to them. There, they would need to turn toward her estuary according to these men, to roughly thirty miles distant from a nearby warrior filled fortress known as Lud's Dun, which they strenuously advised Caesar to stay well clear of. They described a vast fortress run by a fearsome and immortal, *silver-handed* dragon who was descended from the sun God Bel, and Caesar struggled to suppress a chortle at this nonsense, but regardless, he noted well that this so called 'Lud's Dun' controlled the upriver access points with a heavily guarded crossing. Thirty miles south of this 'dragon's lair' they would find an already bribed fort they called Karr Dorebruff, one of those minor king's strongholds and built at the root of a long, hooklike finger of land thrusting out into the Tamesa and curving toward its mouth. Just past the knuckle of this crooked, finger like isthmus they would be met by a guide, who at low tide would lead them through the correct set of withy markers in the treacherous marshes, and

where they could safely cross the wide, muddy trough of that river there at low tide. This they would do in a fleet of flat barges the locals used for cattle ferries, and all Caesar's men and equipment would be delivered to a large, oft flooded island there known locally as Kanvey, situated tight to the eastern shore. Once across the mud and the marshes there, they would smash the ferries and push inland, effectively circumventing the large Prittanic stronghold of Lud's Dun further upriver, avoiding this apparently insurmountable bastion and all its allied enemy, and also cutting a substantial number of miles from their journey. From there, they could gain the road heading east through Trinovanta and to friendly territory. Once on the dry land of the furthest shore of the Tamesa, they would still be far from safe territory however and would need to face an unknown but reduced number of Trinovantan troops. It should not prove too difficult for Caesar to overwhelm or circumvent these reserve soldiers and to then head further east, to where a large body of Clued Danti's warriors would be waiting in support, and to escort them from there to their isolated territories. These animated men asked Commios in their swift and musical language to tell Caesar, that from the northern banks of the Tamesa, it was roughly a long day's march to the major river boundary in northern Trinovanta these men described through Commios. It was where the hard route to their two large towns and the strongholds of Karr Berea begins, and from where the road to their coastal port and the dun of Ippis begins. Two more days of determined marching would bring them to the sanctuary they so desperately needed, and if his legionaries were expert at one thing, it was marching.

Caesar called for some refreshments, and in this lull in their discussions, Labienus took him by the elbow for a quiet word. He too had been thinking hard, and this experienced tactician felt sure that he could improve the odds a little, proposing an amendment quietly to Caesar, and one which could allow them to escape the confines of this cursed beach without the expected casualties of the current plan. Labienus' bold plan also proposed turning their furtive strategy of escape into one of bold and surprising attack. This experienced Legate went on to outline a cunning,

two-pronged plan; the declared, and the private between themselves only. It was a devious plan, and one which was calculated shrewdly to throw the Prittans' defensive planning into shambles on both fronts, and at the same time, it might just cut the head off the snake which opposed them. A sharp and final, *secret* addition to their bold planning was readily agreed upon by a clearly impressed Caesar when Labienus laid it out in whispers in his ear. Their Belgic visitors were also ecstatic when Commios interpreted Labienus' bold amendment to their proposed plan, apart from the hidden and undeclared part, of which Commios was also kept ignorant. These Prittans began jiggling about on the wet decking of this huge ship in their excitement when informed of this brilliant tactical adjustment, babbling incoherently to each other.

Just finding the land to spread out in proper battle formation would be a relief to these dyed in the wool, old school campaigners, and even Labienus was now warming to the all-in gambit. The plan that took final shape and which was refined and adjusted over the following hour looked like an entirely valid proposition. In fact, if their plan was carried out to the letter, not only would it get them off this Dis-cursed beach for the last time, but it could also prove a catastrophic blow to the Prittanic allies, throwing their chain of command and their whole defensive campaign into chaos while they all escaped together. Commios entertained these visitors as Caesar and Labienus retired to a corner of this vessel between two massive, curving beams to discuss all that they had heard. Labienus quietly outlined his real and undeclared plan once more to an excited Caesar, who stood with glittering eyes in the shadows as he appreciated its cleverness and appreciating too the ferocious intelligence of his Legate now, more perhaps than he ever had. He remained expressionless however, even as Labienus put the final, cunning images to his outstanding and very secret adjustment to him quietly under these dripping timbers. Caesar slapped a fist into his palm with feeling at the final detail, doing precisely what the tall and aloof patrician had clearly expected.

The two Romans returned smiling to their visitors, and promises were made over sincere handshakes, and the finally agreed plan of action along with the price for the same were finally settled. Caesar surprisingly spent some time with the Trinovantan King Clued as Labienus and Commios entertained their visitors, delighting him by showing him chests of amazing Roman arms and armorials in this huge cabin before he ended the tour, returning him to the gathering of animated barbarians under these damp timbers and who were preparing to take their leave.

These departing men were now six in number, and each carried a heavy looking leather satchel as they sneaked out of the beached timber colossus in darkness, keeping to the shadows and crouching as they hurried across these horribly noisy pebbles. Leaving Caesar and his officers in deep discussion on his flagship, this colluding group of stealthy visitors stole off into the night and crunched as softly as they could across these pebbles like base, dockyard thieves. Ignored now by the dozens of soldiers around this campfire and their barricade, these stealthy conspirators made their way off this enemy beach. Although they were cautious, and despite crouching among the looming shadows like rats as they scurried away, they were seen leaving nonetheless, and from the woodland fringe overlooking this beach. Those six traitors were spotted sneaking off by a single pair of eagle eyes only, and these above the screaming blue tattoo of an invisible man.



Chapter Eighteen.

Since the allied Albion and Galedonian engagement, Eirwen had spent up to fourteen hours of each of those long and exhausting days in the harrowing, scream torn wards of her field hospital. For three consecutive nights, she had staggered to the Galedonian encampment in the dark hours at the end of each shift and had then crawled into her campaign bed in the tent adjoined to her father's. These were long and bloody days of supporting shattered body parts as the surgeon either removed them or stitched them back together. Or, she had spent those gruelling hours helping blinded soldiers to defecate or to pass water, or cleaning these and other foul emissions of the injured, sick and the dying from her ward. These long white canvas tents, their neat rows of clean, linen covered beds, and the white, linen clad nurses who served them had all looked so perfect and so modern to Eirwen's eyes last week when they had been erected and equipped. Everything had been washed and disinfected, and dozens of woollen blankets had been folded in preparation. Hundreds of linen dressings and bandages had been cut and prepared by her women, and after so much team effort, all had finally been made ready. Dozens of mixed pots and receptacles crowded the shelves of the meddyg officer's separate tent, and they were filled with the ointments, creams, pastes and preparations they might need for this war. Here, he also kept in wooden chests the numerous medical instruments he and his assistants may be called upon to use, from fine bronze scalpels to skin gripping tongs, bone saws, trepanners and everything in between. Following many weeks of diligent planning and sustained work, they were finally prepared for the worst. Their first patient had been a noble's son, who had broken his ankle falling from the pole of his father's carbad as he showed off to his friends, and in hindsight this had been the lull before the storm. A few short hours later these pristine white clinics had been desecrated and defiled beyond expectation and by the blood, pus, vomit and all the other fluids which

leak from torn and shattered bodies. The white walls and the whitened sheets were stained horribly, and all her lovely white clad nurses at day's end had looked like overzealous abattoir workers. The peaceful silence of these once serene pavilions had too been torn by the agonised screams of the injured, or the forlorn ranting of some poor unfortunate who had lost his wits somewhere in the devastating maelstrom of battle. Once the immense shock at the dreadful state of the first men arriving at this hospital had passed and the panicky rushing about of nurses abated, Eirwen had realised with a jolt that these were Albion men. Worse, by their armorials, these mortally wounded and dying men who were being carried into these blood splattered wards were men of Selgofa! She had been frantic then, not knowing if Cadwy was involved or not. Some of these men seemed familiar to her though, and her terror slowly grew with each new arrival of the ox carts. As the meddygs' red jacketed *cludydd* brought in the injured in a continuous stream, she had scanned every bloodied and mud-streaked face for him, but she had not been sure if Cadwy and his cyfail were even involved in the fighting. The types of life-changing, debilitating and crippling injuries these soldiers had sustained had broken her heart, and these had been the lucky survivors. The thought of her beautiful Cadwy receiving anything so horrible had made her feel faint and bilious that harrowing day, and so she had been forced to push her terror away just to carry on with her work, as did every young nurse under her authority. Every torn and blood smeared face that came into this hospital was inspected by the most beautiful nurse these depleted fighters had ever imagined never mind seen, but Cadwy was thankfully not among the wounded. Eirwen was beginning to think that he and his men were uninvolved in what must be the most terrible and unimaginable slaughter when abruptly, her blood had run as cold as a high winter stream. An agonised Bleddyn had been half-carried into her tent by two burly men in their crimson jackets, and with an arrow protruding from his left shoulder. The realisation had shocked her to the core. This was Cadwy's champion and his right-hand man; literally!

The arrowhead had not passed through Bleddyn to protrude from his back sadly, as this was a more straightforward procedure by cutting off the head and sliding the greased shaft back through the wound. Bleddyn's Roman arrowhead was still buried among the big cluster of nerves around the area of the wound, and due to this and the status of the patient, the senior Meddyg had operated on Bleddyn himself. Once the huge warrior had succumbed to the poppy milk, praying that this foreign missile was clean, Eirwen had assisted the surgeon as he expertly slid the pair of slim and long handled, heavily embossed bronze *Greek* spoons into the red mouth of the wound, one to either side of the protruding wooden shaft. It was a delicate procedure, especially in this vital area of the body, and a steady but purposeful hand was required to work these articulated spoons deep into the torn flesh and to encompass the head of the arrow. Once closed, they encapsulated the barbed arrowhead and allowed its safe removal, again by slow and steady withdrawal. The removal, the flushing and suturing of the wound had gone well, as had its dressing by Eirwen, and Bleddyn had snored deeply on his recovery bed, swathed in her bandages. Eirwen had taken exceptional care of him, checking on him regularly during her rounds of these rows of campaign beds. He had managed to give her the bare details after he had emerged from the sleepy stage following his surgery, in that Cadwy was well and uninjured when last he saw him. However, Bleddyn had gone on to tell her that Cadwy was in the thick of the fighting and was shaping up to take on a centurion when Bleddyn had been helped from the field. He had told her all this with a clear and immense pride before succumbing to the pain and falling into a deep sleep, hoping it would fill her with the same, but it had done the complete opposite. This news had almost shattered her composure right there and then, but her character had allowed her the control required to squash that fluttering, rising panic and to do the right thing when called upon. Eirwen had fought back her tears and her fears, gathered her courage, and on unreliable legs had continued with her rounds, but her heart had been a cold and lifeless block in her chest from that moment. When Cadwy had found her after the battle, assisted by

Hefin and with a sodden jerkin held to his face over some blood soaked and filthy field dressings, Eirwen's hand had flown to her mouth, as he was absolutely drenched in blood. She had dropped a clay dish of utensils to the muddy boards of this field hospital and with a shocking clatter at the dread sight of him, waking many of the dozing injured. She had flown to him with a look of complete horror on her lovely face.

The copious amounts of blood which escape any head wound usually made them look a lot worse, and all she had seen was the congealing mass of blood and the monstrous gash. She recalled almost panicking as she had thought him blinded, and her handsome fiancé looked at that moment as if a maniac had butchered him. This popular volunteer nurse had been instantly forgiven by all her patients for the uproar, and by Cadwy for the overreaction. She remembered being calmed a little by Hefin's placating words, telling her that he would live and see perfectly well but that he would have a nasty scar on his forehead for the rest of his days, vastly improving his looks in Hefin's cheerful opinion. When they had cleaned him up and inspected the wound, her face had been stricken pale by the huge and dreadful, gaping gash, with the nasal bone and cut forehead exposed and the purple and swollen, piggy eyes of her courageous and victorious Cadwy staring bleakly back at her. That already felt like an eternity ago, and his treatment had been a minor procedure compared to all that she had done since.

Once Eirwen had managed a hastily eaten supper of something or other each night, she had fallen immediately into the deep, dreamless but much needed slumber of the truly exhausted. Lydia had undressed her as she snored away oblivious, and it was her most loyal handmaiden who had put her to bed properly and was the last person to check on her each night before she too stole away for her meagre allotment of sleep in the crowded servant's quarters. It would be Lydia that would awake Eirwen each morning too, just after the crow of the cock with her breakfast prepared and clean clothes laid out for the day. Someone else was tasked to walk, water and feed Bledri her hound, but at night he was her silent

and ever patient guard as Eirwen slept the sleep of the dead alongside him. Young female servants and handmaidens always worked the longest hours of all the indentured servants and employees in Prydein and elsewhere in this world, but they were better off by far than the hundreds of slaves in their hovels. It is an age-old truth, that the young and the well cared for young especially recover quickly and need to be kept busy. Lydia also helped her mistress at the terrifying hospital wards on top of her own duties, and she would take armfuls of pus and blood sodden linen down to the river and wash them out there, but sheets were heavy when wet, and it was hard and unrelenting work. The women of Galedon were brought up this way, however, as were the women of Gabrantofica in Breged from where Lydia hailed and across this vast country. It is a fundamental core to all Brythonic learning from cradle to grave; that when your tribe is at war, *all* hands are required. Civilians too feel this need to contribute to the war effort in any way they can. The wisest of them do this conspicuously.

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The fresh air of this forest seemed cleansed by the previous rains, and so it was a fine and sunny morning as this *catrawd* of Carfetan soldiers returned at an easy pace along this sun dappled route, back to their allied war camp. Most of the riders in the impressive vanguard of this 'regiment' sported a brace of boarlets or bunches of rabbits or even a small deer slung over the glossy rumps of their horses. The smart, well-mounted officers to the front of this military formation chatted easily between themselves as they negotiated this woodland track ahead of their companies of men, and this casual atmosphere permeated the long ranks stretching behind them on this broad forest lane. The lines of archers stepping lightly to the flanks of these mounted officers and the long rows of men stretching far behind them were equally relaxed, and even as they approached the outer regions of this forest, these bowmen were taking game with snap shots at leaping animals in the undergrowth to either side. Very few missed their mark, as not only was it their profession, their

pride and their reason for living, they had coin on the count. The impressive gŵyr at the front of these officers and clearly their leader was a huge, broad-shouldered man with a square and prominent, lantern jaw. This impressive chin was deeply dimpled at its centre as if Brigida had stuck her finger in it when he was brought squealing back into this world, to see perhaps if such an enormous chin was in fact real. This big man, leaning easily from his beautifully tooled and decorated saddle and laughing uproariously with his men was *Cadlywydd* Cadallan ap Cadall; the renowned general and ruler of the northern, *military* House of Carfeta in Breged. This often quiet, studious general had been appointed honorary *Cadfridog* of this great allied army by the five great kings of Prydein themselves as he was the most experienced and qualified man for the position of 'Field-Marshal', but in the company of his chosen men, he was gregarious, affable and clearly at his happiest. Honorary *Cadfridog* Cadallan as now rightly known is a wealthy Carfetan noble, and he is the very essence of his wild and unflinchingly warlike tribe personified. The rest of his craggy features accommodate the Herculean jawline by necessity, and the hard, dark and cruel eyes which stare dispassionately from under brown, beetling brows give nothing away and miss nothing in return. Cadallan's largesse and his *bonhomie* are part of his huge character, and he is always expansive in the company of his best men and famously generous to them too, who in return are utterly loyal to him. This regular procedure is also typical of the man as all his officers would readily attest. Cadallan loved to hunt and to exercise his men at dawn, and at hunt's-end would bring all these elite, oath-sworn spearmen of his with him back to the officers' camp before he dismissed them to their own campsites nearby in the forest. He did this so that he could drink Carfetan beer with his men, but more importantly, flouting all perceived *royal* protocol Cadallan would scrupulously share the catch with all his chosen men, even the so-called *forbidden* choice cuts of the venison as no king in this land could claim these from the Carfetau.

Today's hunt had been a bumper one, and all these chosen men in this, the finest of all the elite brigades of the deer looked forward to an

excellent supper. However, it was almost noon, and it was their midday break and repast which most interested these prime warriors now along with the kill count and the winner's coin. Through to his bones, this seasoned and celebrated general of such wide repute was a soldier's soldier, and his men loved him for it. They had taken to calling him *Pendragon* with immense pride since his appointment, and were justified in doing so, as these days it was an appointed title and agreed by the druids mainly for large wars between federations, but to lead a historic war against the invading Romans was more than ample justification. Although he had demurred at first, those who knew him well understood his delight, and Cadallan had soon tired of denying the title. His clothes spoke of an unassuming, workmanlike quality, and his mail and armour too were superb but also without decoration, apart from the flashing and beautiful copper deer cygil of his House which leapt athletically across his contoured steel breastplate. He eschewed the wearing of any jewellery to battle and bore no ink, but he allowed his officers both vanities. Many of his subordinate leaders dressed better than he did and would wear much of their gold at once to battle, which set their inspirational general apart from these ordinary soldiers' direct superiors. It also endeared the Cadlywydd to his thousands of sworn spearmen, especially this brigade of his finest hand-picked men. Cadallan kept his face and the expanse of his rugged, deeply dimpled jawline shaved and plucked clean of any hair, and the thick, black hair on his head was kept short and was tempered now with flecks of iron grey. Although this no-nonsense look was an attempt to distance himself from any hint of *royalty* and to play down his elite status, compared to the flamboyant majority of his subordinate officers, it was Cadallan who always stood out from the crowd. Along with the neat but practical dress, his armour and weapons whilst understated were of the very highest quality, and his business-like manner and his clipped and functional, soldier's way of speaking showed him to be a true career officer, whose very existence revolved around all things martial. The Carfetau are now a military dictatorship directly descended from King Brutus, and these denizens of Trojan inspired, all-out warfare are ruled by

their warrior aristocracy and have been for over two hundred years. General Cadallan ap Cadall and his immediate progenitors have been the military rulers of the House for several generations, and since one rogue Trojan king, a madman apparently and a descendant of Hector who had committed the worst of treasons, breaking the ancient Carfetau apart. It had been Cadallan's progenitors who had wrested control from the madness which had followed that territory wide, internecine bloodletting which had become legendary across Prydein in the intervening years. This impressive, brutal looking man's cold eyes, set deeply into the frightening and almost crude, granitelike features, and his great buttress of a chin all gave him a dangerous and belligerent air of constant challenge, and it suited his personality and his demeanour admirably. This infamous general and now temporary field-marshal and the *dictator* of allied Prydein stood for everything his people stood for, and everyone in Prydein knew that his infamous tribe were well-prepared to defend their rights, traditions, culture, their strongholds and their lands to the death. The 'people of the deer' have proved their unbreakable credos time and again over their long and bloody history, and facing any major battle or war when total defeat was suspected, they would slaughter their own infirm and their aged, their babies, their livestock and their pets, before then fighting to the death to avenge them all. Inspired by their glorious ancestors in all things, they sustained their militarised society, and grew it quickly, retaining the ancient Trojan command structure and honouring the principles handed down to them by King Brutus and his offspring, but the modern day Carfetau however have no monarch since *the* scandal which almost destroyed them all, and these fierce, unbending people are ruled now by an aristocracy made up of their own warrior class. They are too similarly ruthless, militaristic to the core and perpetually warlike. This was perhaps Cadallan's less than subtle motive for his understated dress and his military deportment, as no *king* would ever again rule in Carfeta. It is also perhaps why this, their most feared and uncompromising prime warlord was chosen as commander in chief; the *pendragon* of the biggest army Prydein had ever raised in all her ancient and most glorious history.

This long and relaxed brigade of chosen men with the leaping copper deer emblazoned across their shields left the cool, dappled shadows and broke the treeline of this forest at an easy pace, emerging into bright, late morning sunshine. A flock of startled starlings took flight on bejewelled wings from the dew glistened turf at their appearance, and from where they had been gorging on fat summer worms. A cuckoo called out his familiar name from somewhere behind them, and a darting pair of larks sang him to shame in response and as they vanished into this forest behind these men with a flick of their wings. There were fine motes of dust and pollen drifting along in lazy clouds on this indolent summer breeze, and the smart horses of the leading men in this brigade passed through this gossamer curtain, creating twisting vortices to swirl behind them as they walked sedately into camp. Pendragon Cadallan led more than five hundred of his finest men through this summer haze and between the two familiar hillocks which marked the western approaches to the Bregedian section of this enormous *pencadlys*. His foot soldiers followed in two long ranks, happy at the leisurely pace and at the relaxed atmosphere as this most beautiful morning's exercise ended. These men all walked with the style and the easy attitude of a truly elite brotherhood, and smiles were breaking out among these celebrated soldiers as the rising sun warmed their bones. As they approached their horse lines, the baggage carts and their cooking fires, comrades held up arms in greeting at their approach, and the crowd around the Carfetan camp stood to watch as these famous men and their infamous leader re-entered this great Brythonic war camp. They were regarded here as the very finest brigade of soldiers in Prydein bar-none, heroes all, and the names of each individual were known intimately to all these watching Carfetan warriors and civilians alike, and they drew the eye of every man and woman here with pride and more than a little envy.

This enormous swathe of flat, oval shaped land was surrounded by several incongruous looking small hillocks, which were all crowned by stands of hazel and rowan. Each hilltop copse was populated by a competing family of different songbirds, which entertained and delighted the multitude of

people in this enormous camp each morning. Two of the larger and more identifiable hills marked the greater eastern approach to this wide pasture which accommodated this temporary tented town, making up the allied headquarters of the five Brythonic kings in this huge, allied war camp. An abutted group of four large and square pavilions formed the main *pencadlys*; the tented throne hall and war council chamber, set up in the lee of a central hill. The wide but impermanent avenue from the central parade ground leading to the impressive front portico of that headquarters pavilion complex was lined on both sides by tall torches which were all lit at dusk and made a memorable sight. Arrayed around this group of tents and mounted on tall poles was a long, curving row of the twenty-eight, honourable and ancient, *vassa*/ banners of the allied tribes for all to see and to wonder at. The taller and larger banners of the five *ruling* kingdoms were arrayed centrally around the large canvas porch, totalling a sacred number of thirty-three and creating a spectacular entrance to this very Brythonic *pencadlys*.

The striking *sea-eagle* banner of the valiant Fotadina in Albion had taken pride of place the night before and in a nearby glade, where Prince Ioddo ap Cennydd had received his royal pyre. King Cennydd had stood at the head of his son's funeral cortege, and the grief of his loss was etched deeply into his rugged but extremely handsome face, exaggerated perhaps by his feelings of guilt. Cadwy and the rest of his cyfail had been inconsolable throughout the traumatic ceremony, but they had loyally and stoically stood vigil at the site throughout the night and as Iddo's pyre reduced and smouldered. The druids had performed their ceremonies, the *gŵyrd* and the *werrin* had filed past, paying their homage to the brave young prince on his final resting place, before all had eventually drifted off to their tents and to the beer pavilions. Cadwy and his forlorn cyfail had remained, one standing at each corner of the scorched rectangle and facing inwards with their heads bowed in their grief and each with his sword held staunchly upright. They did this unflinchingly throughout the dark hours to honour him until long after the fire had sizzled out and in the pouring and unrelenting rain, which had thankfully masked their tears.

To the south of this military campaign centre was erected the *clafdy*, the two enormous, white canvas tents of their busy 'field hospital' along with its adjoining meddyg officer's tent. A temporary forge had been constructed to the east with its own slatted roofing to keep the rain off the fire and the attached bellows workers. Alongside that huge, hurriedly built forge with its associated and necessary covered workshop benches, several quickly erected and thatched storerooms had been assembled in a roped off section, designated as a farriery and a maintenance area. The officers' billets of the thirty-three tribes represented were scattered in their own order around this huge maes and in groups, blocks or long rows of tents and marquees of wildly distinctive designs, shapes and colour. Behind these demarked sleeping zones were the duty horse lines, and two large paddocks had been fenced off to hold the oxen and the vast herd of off duty horses, whilst a larger area to the north behind this central pencadlys had been reserved for the baggage carts and many more, quickly built storage shelters.

Acting Field-Marshal and General Cadallan; *Pendragon* of Prydein was leading his extraordinary brigade of veterans into the Bregedian lines from the west and into his own section, when a couple of loud shouts coming from the southern approaches made him frown and stand up in his bootstraps to see what was afoot. A large contingent of Belgic looking carbads approached sedately in a cloud of dust, leading a crowd of shuffling spearmen and flanked loosely by around two hundred tired looking horsemen. This large force of combrogi had sauntered into the encampment from the southwest and the coast which was a common enough occurrence. These chariots, coming at a slow trot, led this scruffy and mixed host of more than a thousand Belgic looking horse and spearmen, which were strung out behind them in little obvious formation and had the appearance of a long-travelled and weary band of soldiers. Something jarred with the general at that moment however, as there was something about their overrelaxed attitudes and their friendly waves that just did not sit right. By their mixed bag of shields, mantles and other clothing they did not seem to be from any one particular tribe, more of an

alliance of smaller, more disparate Belgic tribes. The finer points of their armorials and dress were not discernible to Cadallan from this range, but they were armed to the teeth which itself was no great surprise, but there was something about them, their behaviour, but it was something he could not put his finger on. Their exhaustion did not ring true to the general either now they had dawn a little closer, and he was a man who knew *all* about utterly spent men. Cadallan's frown deepened. His battle senses were stirring, and this unbeaten martial master never ignored these little voices as they had saved his life on many a past occasion in war. These arrivals seemed friendly enough and were not doing anything particularly unusual, although they did not seem to be heading for any particular House or encampment from these dozens around the field either, just generally heading toward the centre of the cadlys, which again in itself was unusual. Nobody was expected today, or he would know about it, and Cadallan's hard eyes turned to stone as puzzle pieces began to fall ominously into place, painting a terrible picture in his mind, and one which he struggled yet to believe as it would be an act so heinous it was almost unthinkable.

"Don't dismount and don't fall the men out either yet Dilwyn!" He called loudly over his shoulder to his captain, and even a casual remark from Cadallan was a direct order to these professionals. Knowing his moods intimately they could tell by his voice and the sudden change in body language that something was amiss, and they became profoundly serious suddenly, falling in quickly and correctly behind him and his mounted officers. More, unfortunate jigsaw pieces began to slot together then for Cadallan, and a sliding feeling of terrible foreboding struck him in the guts; an old feeling. Standing tall and watching with shrouded eyes, he understood the cause of those shouts. The two Brythonic warriors guarding this encampment's southwestern approach had clearly been ignored by this Belgic host, and they had just continued into camp regardless of their protestations. They had ignored those two furious guards and were now heading boldly into the centre of this encampment unchecked. Now, worrying alarm bells were ringing in the general's head,

and he decided to play safe and to investigate this suspicious arrival himself. “Catrawd on me!” He ordered in his signature parade ground bark, and his officers formed up around him quickly, his men dressing off in their marching ranks behind them and checking each other’s kit and weapons quickly. “Watch and listen for my orders and be ready for anything.” Cadallan growled at his officers, before turning forward in his saddle and leading them through these encampment lines at a canter. The general led his men into the huge, central clearing of this *cadlys* and moved sharply south of the *pencadlys* pavilions, his foot soldiers breaking into a run to keep up with him and his officers. Cadallan sat tall on the great war horse, still glowering at these strangers and leaning forward in his saddle, his enormous chin leading the way. Watching these visitors intently as he trotted at an oblique angle toward them, he would ensure that he and his men would intercept this host long before they drew near to the centre of this operational, administrative and medical sprawl. Once he had halted their ingress, he would demand to know their business here, and he would hear their excuses for the rude flouting of *his* boundary access protocols.

* * * * *

“Darling keep still!” Eirwen told him again and as she carefully changed the linen dressing over the wad of freshly masticated *breci-gwyn*; the efficacious white wort, before then wrapping a clean linen bandage around his head. Cadwy peered out at her through his blood-filled eyeballs, deeply set into their purple and swollen sockets. ‘The worst pair of black eyes he had ever seen’, in the senior meddyg’s professional opinion. Once cleansed with vinegar and smeared with honey, his wound had needed over twenty stitches of fine catgut to draw the gaping wound closed around the top of the exposed nasal bones and the deeply blade scored and exposed bone of his forehead. Eirwen had stitched him up herself two days ago after his great battle, and she recalled the immense and pivotally important day in her life vividly as she put her things away and tidied up.

With trembling fingers at first and a fine bone needle she had pulled, prodded, punctured tied and sutured his already bruised and painful skin, terrified she would hurt him further. After the fourth stitch, her pink tongue had vanished from between her teeth and the tremble had left her dextrous fingers. Eirwen had relaxed enough to talk to him calmly then as he had winced and squirmed under her nursing. She had apologised for hurting him especially when cleaning the huge wound, but the gleam in her eye had given her away in the stitching of it, and Cadwy had just pulled one side of his mouth in captive acceptance. 'Just get on with it my love.' He had said gruffly, wincing again and melting her heart as she had pushed the polished bone needle into his puffy face once more. She recalled being meticulous in her stitching, but by the end of the procedure remembered also being amused at his fear, as he had not moved a muscle. Taking deep and careful breaths and exhaling them equally carefully, Cadwy had obdurately stuck to the chair in this little nursing tent of Eirwen's and had begun his deep breathing exercises which always relaxed him, and she chuckled to herself now at the memory, as he was doing just the same now.

"Are we done here?" Cadwy mumbled, looking tired and snapping her thoughts back to the present. As her eyes refocused, she smiled her empathy at him with equal sadness, recalling his long vigil of last night and his own deep sorrow, and yet his bloodshot eyes still lit up in response to her and it squeezed her heart.

"We are done. But I'm taking a break shortly darling, and I thought we could sit on the grass together, on top of the big knoll behind the pencadlys. We could share a midday meal together there under the sun?" She offered with another, more hopeful smile, knowing that Cadwy needed some relaxation and distraction. He nodded slowly then in response and with a half-smile of his own.

"Sounds wonderful!" He grinned carefully.

“Lovely! I already have a basket packed. I just need to do my final rounds and then I’ll be all yours!” She beamed at him now, and then Eirwen left him on the chair to wait for her.

* * * * *

Caesar was surprised to see he still had some fingernails left as he had taken to gnawing at them all morning. He felt his own mortality keenly this new day, as he had never risked so much and lost so much and had never found himself in such a precarious position in all his life. He had survived many narrow scrapes, lost a few fights and had lived through many close calls, as he was a soldier and they were an expected part of army life, but those had been passing moments and snap decisions made in the heat of battle. This campaign had been one compromise after another followed by one calamity after the next, and he had never before felt as if the Gods themselves were conspiring against him. It felt as though blessed Fortuna herself had abandoned him in his hour of need, but he was a long way short of giving up just yet.

This Roman soldier’s day began with a long and glorious draught of cool river water for all to ease their thirst on awakening, and the smell of the cooking food woke them all up completely. Like hungry wolves emerging from a winter lair, these legionaries moved in and surrounded the cooking fires, to wait there unmoving and would not take their eyes from the food as it cooked. Although pleased at the response of his men to him issuing the food reserves, Caesar was beset with doubts since awakening from a troubled sleep. He had refused the dawn timing proposed by his co-conspirators for their escape himself, as nothing could be left to chance. The first part of this vital, even invasion saving procedure needed credibility primarily if the deception was to succeed. Dawn had always been deemed the best time to begin an assault or a battle since men dressed in skins and scratched at the ground with antler picks, and so he knew it to be a time of deep and intuitive suspicion. This worldwide knowledge was just as ancient, and all guards and captains were aware of it and took steps to counter it. Most men are at their lowest ebb in the

early hours of darkness when even the land sleeps, but this deep darkness is for assault on a known enemy and on familiar ground with only death and conquest in mind, whereas most *major* battles commenced at dawn. Rome's needs were different this day, and so Caesar chose to make use of another time, a time when men's focus and duties were distracted by relaxation and hunger, around midday. He had kept an eye on the sun all morning, and shortly before noon, he called his officers together to give them his final beachhead orders. Labienus led Lepidus, Mamurra and Domitus to the council, and this august group of surviving officers helped finalise the hugely altered details of their uniquely *Roman* plan for this pivotal day. These soldiers had been energised and rejuvenated by Caesar's food reserves but also by some wrongful assumptions, and they assembled casually on these pebbles now as preparations had been completed hours ago, and they were all now ready and eager to depart and to sail away from this place as soon as time and tide was right. What they did not know, was that their twelve precious horses would not be shortly embarking with them, as they were to service Caesar and his seven remaining officers for the imminent operation, as were they all. A pair had been designated as pack horses for the water amphorae and the two fastest were handed to their scouts for what was soon to unfold. These two intrepid and ingenious troopers stood ready by their quivering mounts expressionless, both knowing they would not be leading their horses up the ramps and into the holds of their ships along with all these expectant men for their welcomed return to Gaul, as expected by all their enlisted comrades. They had been given their orders earlier and sworn to secrecy by Labienus himself which had been enough to subdue these men into compliance. A frisson of excitement seemed to build among all these men now and for no obvious reason, and this same excitement coursed through all their officers but for quite different reasons. These miles gregarii were all prepared to move out and to board their ships at a moment's notice quite nonchalantly, but the nervous eyes of their officers' were trained on the ridgeline and the mouth of the distant creek for some reason, and so inevitably, every soldier's eye here, even though not one

of these enlisted men knew why were drawn to the same places. They were acutely aware that they were leaving but knew not what they waited for except the conditions perhaps, and seeing their officers' nervous, inland glances they were thoughtlessly compelled to do the same.

The indeterminate sounds arrived slowly and on the swirling wind, gaining in volume and texture as if they were approaching, when in reality these concussive echoes were heading away from this beach. The din was getting louder, partly due to the stiff northerly breeze which carried it, but more by its explosive nature. It soon became clear to all on this beach that there was a major battle taking place inland, again over the ridgeline somewhere, but unseen to all these surprised soldiers. These men looked at each other in wide eyed question as all their surviving numbers were present, and their confusion was infectious. 'Were the Prittans warring between themselves?' Caesar and his staff looked unsurprised however as if that distant uproar had been completely expected, but that was ever the attitude of the officer and so these men around them just shrugged it off. Labienus then nodded to the two scouts, who threw themselves up onto their ponies and nudged them forward along these deep and shifting pebbles with their eyes glued to the ridgeline ahead, but once more the air remained clear of missiles and shouts of alarm, and it was reassuring that the opening gambit at least was working.

Inside half an hour, Caesar had led his astonished men off this beach, in precisely the same manner that his unfortunate foraging party had exited it those days ago, hugging the base of the ridgeline and then heading inland up the narrow river valley. They crouched as they filed along the crown of this wooded ridge they had come to loathe so much, to move soundlessly up the broad drover's lane heading east from it and onto the big promontory overlooking the beach they had just escaped. They had discovered this well-trodden roadway behind the shale which crested this once hated ridgeline and which wound its way through the trees toward the high eastern headland, now ahead of them. This grassy promontory which he and Labienus had coveted for days, now allowed their access to

the eastern plain of Kantion and offered them one final throw of Fortuna's dice. The general stood in the shadows of these trees on this high ridgeline, overlooking the escaped beach to his right and the now just visible, inland battle to his left. The distance was too great to see any real detail, but Commios' diversionary attack on the Prittanic camp had been both prompt and invaluable. It seemed from even this remove that far more Prittanic warriors were arrayed against Commios' Belgic alliance than expected, and it was obviously not the 'walk in the park' that duplicitous and dethroned king had perceived. His talk of the leisurely slaughter of royalty, medical staff and reserve troops, the unprepared and the unarmed may have swayed his uncivilised tribesmen to rally around him and to commit to this bold attack that night, but the promises made to that distant but now embattled Commios were as hollow as the plan Caesar had agreed to. The second, agreed phase of this joint operation involved what Labienus had glibly termed 'removing the head from the snake' to their Belgic allies those nights ago and aboard their flagship. It entailed Caesar forming his troops on the ground below him and then moving swiftly to the rebels' support, to assist them in wiping out that Prittanic camp and their leaders before their armies could respond, and then decamping across Kantion together. It was this courageous and highly tactical, counter-attacking addition which had driven those heathen into a frenzy of delight that night, but Caesar had not trusted any of those barbarian upstarts for a minute, especially Commios, and they should not have trusted him at any point in their congress, as he had never any intention of risking his men to aid that rabble. The ground below him remained as empty as his promise, and as his smiling men headed quietly east behind him, Caesar was content. He had made his own alliances, founded on what remained of his war chest and the promise of the balance in gold coin. With a wry grin and looking at his hungry soldiers filing past, he thought it was as well that gold was inedible. His plans had never included the deluded Commios and his filthy band of homeless and landless brigands, as the strongholds of north-eastern Trinovanta awaited him surely enough, but by his own designs. He had made his own pact

with an odious Prittanic creature with rotten teeth, and one who secretly and very quietly spoke an acceptable if outdated Latin. That was a rogue who was also now an exiled king, but one who had named two royal co-conspirators before departing. Together, those ennobled but impoverished rogues ruled the kingdoms separating Caesar and his men from their freedom, being one King Cingetorix, and one of his vassals; a King Carvillios, both of eastern Kantion and who would both no doubt have taken their share of King Clued Danti's ill-earned gold. Labienus led the best horse up to him by the reins, and Caesar's face was an inscrutable mask as he took the bridle straps, imagining the Belgic faces now turned this way and hoping to see the encouraging dust of his advance. He spat into that same undisturbed dust below and mounted this horse with an athletic leap as his blood was up. Adjusting his seat, he took another last look at that rising dust cloud to the north, his eyes narrowing. Turning in the saddle and taking another look at that detested pebble beach and his remaining moored ships in the bay beyond it, he grimaced and shook his head. His captains had their orders, and they would wait here for twenty-four hours, holding station out in the bay, and if Caesar and his men had not returned in that time, they were to set sail east with one of Clued Danti's guides, already on board his flagship and being treated like a celebrity.

Taking a deep breath and exhaling it with a *whoosh* as he settled himself in this unfamiliar saddle, he straightened and spat again to this foreign ground. "Lupum antris deserta!" He said quietly to himself and with a distinctly canine grin, as for the first time in over a week, the wolf's lair was indeed deserted.

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Eirwen could not wait to escape the hot and airless confines of this tent, and to take a much-needed lunch with Cadwy up on the beautiful knoll behind the pencadlys with its stunning views. She took a last look around this long hospital tent before ducking into her small alcove office, which was made up of no more than three large pieces of canvas held up with

poles and stitched to one end of this big hospital tent, but it allowed her a small measure of privacy at least. Cadwy still sat in one of the two wicker chairs at the small folding table, and she grinned at him waiting there patiently.

“Okay my darling, I’m all done here, but just one more thing before we go.” She told him cheerfully, squeezing past him. Measuring some milky fluid into a tiny pottery cup from one of the many vials and jars on her table, she looked at him again now. “Oh Cadwy, you look so injured and hurt still, it pains me so.” She told him, squeezing his hand and staring her love and her care into his eyes.

“Not as much as it pains me my love.” He growled from the tiny chair, squishing his face up against the tightness and wincing at the sharp bite of pain. “Still, I will try to duck next time.” He said more cheerfully, and tried to smile gamely at her again, but he sucked air in through his teeth at the pain and stopped smiling at once.

“Please do darling! Here, drink this.” She said with a grin, handing him the small cup and taking the other chair, her tone leaving no room for discussion. Cadwy did as instructed and he threw down the foul smelling, milky liquid.

“Yuk, what in Lug’s ar....backside was that!” He blustered with a slow and careful grimace.

“Milk of the poppy sweetie, just enough to dull the pain. You’ll feel a lot.....what on earth?” Eirwen started, standing up without thought as there was suddenly a great outcry in the encampment outside, and worse, it sounded ominously as if they were being attacked!

“Stay here and don’t move!” Cadwy commanded her sharply, standing quickly as his red eyes crystallised in that instant. Striding the full length of this hospital tent toward the entrance and with an animated purpose, Cadwy left her standing there.

“You can’t go Cadwy, you’re injured!” She wailed after him, but he did not even turn around and began to run out of this tent. There was another great crash from outside at that moment, and the camp was suddenly coming alive with yelling and questioning men, the sounds of scraping steel, running feet and the thunderous pounding of great hooves.

Their giant war camp was indeed under attack, and Eirwen went to peer out from behind the canvas flap of this hospital tent, watching wide eyed as this dreaded war she feared so much had come to her. There was a colossal conflagration directly ahead of her and in the huge open area at the centre of this encampment, with a great and confusing flashing of many hundreds of bright weapons. Despite her fears, her gaze was drawn back to the love of her life as he mounted the nearest available horse and drew his long and beloved sword. With her clean bandage vivid around his head, Cadwy charged at the terrifying chaos ahead, whooping and brandishing his sword. His ‘Selgofa and Albion!’ roar carried to Eirwen behind these folds of canvas she clutched, and her eyes grew, as for the first time she had seen the *real* Cadwy ap Cridas; her future husband. Although she was stunned, proud and completely in awe of his unbelievable courage, his joyous transformation into that savage warrior unnerved her, and *that* Cadwy; the one now passing from her view into that melee scared her a little if she was honest. Eirwen was suddenly just that; brutally honest with herself as Cadwy deserved no less from her, and she realised that she would not change one hair on his wonderful head. Terrifying Tywysog, warrior-prince or not, she was going to marry that man if he returned to her alive, and on reflection, she had to agree with Hefin that once all the bruising had gone and the scar had healed, it would give him a piratical, roguish look that would be entirely dishy. Suddenly right then and for some inexplicable reason, the new and warm but troubling sensations and feelings which had been growing in her lately fell into sharp focus, and she was finally able to put a finger on the unfamiliar and persistent ache which had been dogging her. It dawned on her then, and in a rush what her body had been trying to tell her, and it came wrapped in such a depth of feeling, tears sprang from her eyes and she

laughed as they fell from her cheeks. Eirwen realised with an unshakeable certainty, that what she really wanted in all this hard and perilous world was to have Cadwy's children. She dropped the canvas flap back into place and returned to her little office deep in thought. Eirwen had grown up right there and then in those moments of personal and life changing revelation, and sitting at her tiny desk in the smelly, hot confines of this hospital tent, something important and indescribable had fallen into place. Her chin came up and she nodded to herself then, as for the first time in her young life she had a future she craved and a man she loved to the stars and back. She had a real purpose in her life now too, and despite the inconceivable events in play around her at this moment, Eirwen was content. Smiling again now but more seriously and to herself, Eirwen left her little alcove with a steely look in her eye. She returned to her needy charges, and she left the business of sorting out that violence outside to Cadwy with a pragmatic shrug. Her newly found confidence in his ability to do just that was suddenly something sacrosanct and absolute, and this confidence and proud new set to her shoulders was noted by all her nervous patients. These injured men and women until the moment they saw their beloved nurse Eirwen smile had been as terrified as she had been at the arrival of more death and destruction at their door, as had all her young nurses. The courage of her beloved and doting prince, and their own head nurse's calm and caring self-assurance was infectious, and it drew these warriors' haunted eyes away from the entrance to their hospital tent, where they had expected to see at any second armed enemy burst in with murder in their eyes. The troubled minds of these injured were drawn from the dread sounds of close but unseen battle as they held this spectacular and remarkable young woman in their pain filled eyes. Every man, and one or two of the women in these beds would have happily confessed that each was completely in love with this compassionate and beautiful princess, and those same eyes wept homesick but hopeful tears as Eirwen ferch Ederus of Galedon sang to them. Absently gathering bandages and preparing some empty beds for the imminent new admissions and without one single self-conscious

thought, Eirwen threw her head back and sang one of her favourite childhood songs to her patients; *"Oh mam bach where have you been? Your arms and your legs are so terribly thin!"* With the crashing of arms growing ominously outside, she sang the song of the old people softly in a most wonderful and melodious voice, making her patients weep quietly in their beds.

* * * * *

This legendary brigade of Carfetan warriors had been around forty reeds from the head of this rude, mass entrance, approaching them obliquely from the northwest when this glorious sunny morning had lurched into a dark and vengeful noon. These odd-looking new arrivals had clearly seen Cadallan and his men approach to head them off but remained relaxed and friendly as they closed. The pendragon was about to shout his challenge to them when he heard one of his captains calling to him, and Cadallan turned in his saddle as this officer joined him to his left.

"That's King Commios sir, I saw him once in DunCoriel years ago!" This officer told him seriously, pointing to the big, bearded and regal looking man at the head of this force.

"Commios?" Cadallan roared, the full implication of this arrival now hitting home, but these Belgic rebels were far from asleep, and suddenly there was a cloud of arrows slashing the air towards them. "Charge!" Cadallan roared without pause, drawing steel as his terrible warface emerged in a flash of fury. His elite soldiers obeyed instantly, exploding into action and charging the enemy with a thoughtless and wild abandon, to run clear under the first incoming volley.

It was fortunate indeed for this encampment and all within it that General Cadallan was a man of fairness, generosity and habit, as his timely arrival and his constant state of readiness may save this shocking day, and it may save a great many lives too in addressing this atrocious and cowardly act. His brigade of ferocious officers and his top-of-the-line men assaulted these Belgic attackers with an unforeseen speed, a savage ferocity

beyond all belief and with completely unexpected levels of deadly skill. Cadallan's men were all consummate professionals, and their swift action had stalled this advance and it allowed hundreds of other mixed officers, guards and stewards to pour forth and to defend their camp. Many aged lords and nobles made their names again this day, and many old reputations were renewed. These Belgic rebels had not any real chance of success once they had become victims of circumstance and had fallen foul of the elite and indomitable Carfetau. They had also entered a nest of mature vipers in their ignorance and no longer had any real chance of escape either. This event proved to be the most effective method of all for the Brythons in bringing these hugely contrasting and once disparate tribes together, as even the most senior military advisor and administrator was a soldier first and foremost. Dour, retired Galedonian generals strode out to fight alongside senior Albion gŵyr, whilst wily old marshalls of the Paurisau battled shoulder to shoulder with *bronze-shield* staff officers of Caswallawn's Casufelawny in a huge and colourful, mixed bag of expert swordsmen and swordswomen. All these once disparate nobles came together in the joint defence of their allied Cadlys, and they were overjoyed to do so. In orderly and steady lines, these gallant and aristocratic officers of middle and late years, dressed in their shirtsleeves and vests, and with their ageing arwein trailing behind them advanced boldly to engage these Belgic ruffians. If these rebel aggressors ever thought this attack would be easy they were faced with their folly now, as an extensive line of upright and largely grey-haired men and women, some tall, some portly with great bellies and some smaller, bookish looking and studious people flooded the field. All were armed with their fabulous heirloom long swords, and these reserved old ladies and gentlemen tore the rebels to shreds. A lifetime of learning guided these glittering blades brought into daylight after so long in the dark, and the field became an education for those lucky enough to witness it. So many similar but altogether different styles were on display as the finest officers and sword tutors in Prydein were given a golden gift from their Gods. A final chance perhaps to do once again what they had been born to do, the

thing which had propelled them upwards to their vaunted positions in the first place as fit and fearless young warriors; their ability to fight and to deal out unflinching and sudden death with a sword. As this one-sided education continued apace, Brythonic steel flashed with the precision of long experience, and the scruffy bodies of their enemy began to hit the ground in a growing tempo of dull *thuds*. With a huge roar, the fantastic Carfetan foot soldiers in the vanguard finally penetrated the enemy shield wall, and it should prove decisive. The enemy horsemen and charioteers broke away from their mass of spearmen at the onset and when they spotted opposing, hurriedly assembled Brythonic cavalry coming at them at the gallop. The fighting was furious and loud at their embattled frontline at the centre of this huge ground, and the air around this huge encampment was torn by the clashing of steel, terrible screaming, thunderous hooves and hurriedly blown alarm calls. Many differing Brythonic warriors and bravely armed civilians continued to emerge from all sectors of this huge pencadlys to assemble behind their retired nobles in the defence of this ground and who were surprisingly energetic in their long-practiced action at the centre of this massive brawl, and in honourable support of the fantastic and furious Carfetau at the blood sweltering and screaming, cursing frontline.

Cadwy found Hefin, and together they found their other Selgofan officers among the Albion general staff. These men were already well mobilised, and cavalry officers had already joined the allied mounted formations now engaging the enemy cavalry with a great clamour to the southwest of their encampment. Cadwy called two of these late departing officers to him, and once they drew near and bowed from their saddles he gave them some hurried instruction, and they quickly rode off. Major Brast and Meyrug came to him at a run and Cadwy dismounted quickly, throwing his reins to Hefin, who remained mounted as more gŵyrd and spearmen of these Albion Houses moved to their prince. Regardless of his apparent youth and his damaged appearance, and unbeknown to this tall and muscular crown prince of the Selgofau, his *bri* and his reputation had soared recently as he had just achieved the most impressive *barn-isarno*

in all Albion's long and illustrious history. Cadwy's successful 'iron-trial' had been nothing less than his victorious battle with Rome itself, and all these men now looked to the centurion slaying Tywysog of Albion for direction.

"Brast, we need archers!" Cadwy demanded, his eyes still glued to the melee a little more than a hundred *reeds* away, and the major turned to quickly survey these gathering officers around them. Picking out a vassal lieutenant and a captain, the first a good deal taller than the other, Brast called these two men over. The shorter *Nêr y Saethydd* was a bearded and broad-shouldered archer of note with a huge barrel chest and incredibly muscular arms, both festooned with thick tribal tattoos in the bold and flowing Khumric style. This squat, much travelled and powerful Khumric man originally hailed from the tiny Pengarth community huddled above the Conwy estuary in Decawangly territory, but he was now a captain of Albion bowmen. His tall comrade was an Albion man from birth and an infamous woodsman and trapper, and he too was a noted archer, although not in the same league and lacking the power and distance perhaps of his muscular combrogi from Pengarth. "You and your archers are both now under the command of my Major Brast ap Bwlch." Cadwy ordered these experienced men easily when they came to stand to attention before him, and he and the major received quick nods of agreement from these two vassal officers. "Brast, take them quickly down this hill to the northwest and array them over there in the shadow of that small hill." Cadwy pointed to an area roughly forty reeds away. "I do not like the way their chariots are reforming over there. Their attack has clearly failed due to our esteemed general and his amazing men, so they are unpredictable now. From there, you should be able to protect the rear of our gallant generals and the central approaches too, so watch for my signals." He nodded to Brast. With the briefest of salutes, the major turned on his heel, and these two assigned but incongruous looking officers ran behind him to their awaiting contingents of allied archers. "Meyrug you will join Prince Hefin and myself, taking the temporary position of my pencampwr." Cadwy told his sergeant-major, and for the

second time in front of his impressive warlord Meyrug looked as if he had swallowed a goose egg, a similar sized one to the lump which still bulged from his forehead. This man was surprisingly a renowned orator and a well-known storyteller from the famously poetic Cornafau Calon. In relaxed company he was known to be a fine entertainer, but his vocal artistry seemed to evaporate in the company of his warlord, and once again Meyrug began to stammer.

“Mmy Pp...”

“Don’t mention it.” Cadwy interrupted the man mercilessly, but with a grin. “An arwein holds a horse for you there, and I shall be with you presently.” He told him in finality, and Meyrug’s wide eyes glittered back at him with pride. He trotted off to the horse with his shoulders back and with a similar grin on his big, rugged and damaged face.

Cadwy drew some other gŵyrd around him and gave them further instructions, pointing out his concerns and their required actions, and once they left to their various duties he re-joined his much-reduced cyfail. Cadwy consciously did something then he never envisaged doing in all his young life, as he led his men *away* from the fighting, knowing that he was more valuable to Albion and all these people right now doing just that. Hefin and Meyrug rode with him onto the crown of this low hillock they had gathered on and from where they could all oversee the ongoing battle. More vitally, they could witness the effect Cadwy’s orders would have on the same, or not, in which case he could respond accordingly and in time to be effective. He had a young cornwr and a pair of mounted *cennadwr marchog* join his group on this hilltop, and these two proud gentlemen in their green mantles, golden brooches and floppy green hats awaited his battle dispatches on the leanest, fittest horses he had ever seen. The last of the cavalry officers he had instructed before they tore off were now carrying out his orders, and a large phalanx of horsemen had detached from the cavalry melee to pursue the enemy chariots, which had regrouped and were now charging ominously toward the centre of this camp. Another dozen Brythonic riders had also galloped away from that

huge swirling battle at his orders, heading for the coast. Cadwy received a report that at some early point in this engagement, Commios was seen to sheer away from the front of this battle. His horse had carried him away apparently, the rider hanging around its neck and feigning injury as the rogue escaped the field. Commios' duty was done perhaps, as he had clearly been instrumental in organising this deplorable and utterly honourless attack.

War chariots are only used where the ground allows, as whilst they are simply repaired, trained horses are not. Any military encampment by necessity needs to be erected on even ground, slightly inclined if possible to aid drainage, and this huge encampment was no different. This mutually agreeable ground had surely drawn these vehicles here today, as if it was at all possible chariots were the preferred way of doing battle for their owners. A detachment of brave Albion cavalry had managed to turn the bulk of those chariots below, targeting the drivers with their long lances and scattering most of them, and their mounted archers now began to pick off their occupants, but it was a *hit-and-miss* affair from horseback. Half a-dozen of these rattling, dangerous vehicles had avoided his deflecting cavalry attack and were now tearing across the turf toward the headquarters pavilions, and whilst Cadwy thought that these large assembly tents would be mostly empty by now, those carbads had to be stopped. He stood in his bootstraps and yelled down to Brast before his long and curving deployment of archers, roughly forty reeds away and thirty feet below him.

"ARCHERS!" He bellowed through cupped hands and pointed to those chariots, but Brast had already targeted them.

A haphazard black oval of around two hundred Brythonic arrows flashed upwards like a finely thrown fishing net cast onto the blue heavens above. They were lost then in the midday sun until they swooped down out of the light again like black pins, to strike their targets or the earth between them. Two hundred more followed in quick succession, to be repeated swiftly, and Belgic rebels fell from seats and trestles with almost

perpendicular arrows sunk into them. A few horses fell, catapulting the chariots they towed behind them up into the air along with their screaming passengers, but not one human survived. The horses now pulling empty chariots veered away, leaving their fallen drivers and owners lying on the bloodied grass behind them, some pierced with many arrows. They trotted back to where they had come from and headed for home, whilst others came to a slow trot and a halt to start munching the grass under them. All the charioteers had been expertly shot from their moving vehicles from a range of more than two hundred *reeds*, and it was phenomenal archery. Cadwy frowned then as one madly panicked pair of horses tore onwards, both hauling an unmanned carbad at a tremendous speed. That empty, arrow-studded vehicle jostled violently as it hammered and bounced over that uneven ground in the distance at a neck breaking pace, showing no sign of slowing down. Not just the seat and the framework, but even the yoke and harnesses of that juddering chariot were bristling with arrows, and it was a miracle that both horses were unscathed. They were veering slowly to the left, due to the ungoverned dominance of the righthand horse in Cadwy's opinion, and his eyes flicked upwards, his heart jamming fast in his throat. That careering vehicle was heading inexorably for the field hospital now, but Cadwy hoped it would keep its slow curve to the left and miss the hospital by quite a margin, but his heart still thumped in anxiety, and his gaze was fixed fast to the rear of that wildly careering vehicle. His gimlet eyes narrowed then as due to the camber of the ground; this runaway chariot was no longer wheeling left but heading directly for the *clafdy*. The white canvas hospital tents were directly in its path, packed with injured men and nurses, but far more importantly Eirwen! Cadwy swallowed his heart down with a gulp and stood in his bootstraps again with his eyes blazing, but Brast had seen the danger for himself, and even as his archers loosed off again, Cadwy was compelled to shout the obvious, and the fear was clear in his voice.

"Shoot those damn horses!" He yelled, his voice breaking, and the archers of Albion were trying hard to do just that, as volley after volley of brightly

fletched arrows streaked high into the blue sky. Hefin's face was ashen beside him on this hilltop and just as stricken as Cadwy's, his mouth hanging open in disbelief, as those uncontrollable horses were now galloping full tilt toward the distant hospital. A hot jet of fear galvanised Cadwy then, and he spurred this strange horse under him viciously as the sounds of battle curiously faded in his ears. The startled animal shot forwards with a snort of objection, but it galloped gamely down this small hill, nonetheless, bolting toward the distant pavilions. Cadwy's two compatriots tore after him, but it seemed as though the pair of mindlessly galloping horses towing that empty chariot ahead were accelerating, not slowing. They ran arrow straight for the hospital tents with the frantic gŵyr of Selgofa in blazing pursuit, but they and the chariot they towed behind them at such terrifying speed were now almost out of bowshot.

"Arglwydd Brigida! I bet those terrified horses can't see one tent from another!" Hefin yelled from behind Cadwy, and as if in confirmation, that pair of crazed horses blazed into the confusing whiteout of canvas ahead of them, passing the point of no return at full tilt. They were mere vanishing reeds now from the hospital tent and its dozens of taut guy ropes when an arrow suddenly struck the righthand horse almost vertically behind the ear, and it felled it like a blow from an axe. The result on the lefthand horse and the chariot they towed was equally cataclysmic, and they began to lift and turn as the dead horse hit the ground and as his terrified partner was catapulted over it. The arrow festooned, empty chariot shot perpendicular into the air, suspended on its long pole for a brief second before it and the two big heavy horses went over, the living and the dead. They came down hard and smashed into the left hand side of the hospital tent upside down, crushing it completely with an enormous and hair-raising *crash!*

"No! My Gods no!" Cadwy growled, gritting his teeth painfully. It felt as though his heart was tearing itself apart as he galloped toward the hospital and Eirwen, groaning aloud now with the agony of dreaded anticipation. He watched with a growing cold and dread feeling as a full

third of the tent ahead was virtually flattened in front of him by the massive impact. That somersaulting mass of timber and horseflesh had landed high on the sloping canvas roof and had collapsed the whole left side of the main hospital tent, but more crucially the end which contained Eirwen's little office. With an icy talon piercing his heart, Cadwy could see that if anyone had been trapped directly under that colossal, crashing weight, they could not possibly have survived. The thrashing of the terrified living horse was compounding the situation and causing further injury to anyone caught under it, and Cadwy knew instantly what he had to do. As he thundered up to this mind-numbing incident, the muted screams of the injured came from within, and the surviving horse still strapped to its yoke screamed and thrashed in the terrible depression he, his dead partner and their heavy wooden chariot had made in this canvas sanctuary. Cadwy vaulted off the still running horse, drawing his dagger from his belt as he landed surely on his feet, and with two great bounds, he leapt over the dead horse and clambered over the upturned chariot. Trying not to think about the squirming and the screaming people under him, Cadwy braved the murderous and slashing hooves, to scramble between them and to straddle the heaving chest of the surviving horse thrashing on its back. He shoved the horse's terrified face away with his left hand, and with a powerful stroke with his right, he slashed its throat to the bone. The scalding and stinking, equine blood gushed from the throat and the cut artery of this terrified and wide-eyed horse at a tremendous force and a huge volume, right into Cadwy's face, drenching him completely and everything around him. This swiftly dying horse thankfully began to calm as did the shocking volume of blood spraying from its gaping throat, and Cadwy grabbed a handful of the stiff, blood slicked canvas beneath him, and he slashed it open with the dagger, pushing his left hand into the opening and cutting the canvas open to the ground as he slid downwards to regain his footing on the grass. Hefin and Meyrug were hacking like mad men at two of the thick guy-ropes with their swords, and the tension suddenly went out of this end of the canvas structure, dead and injured people spilling out of the great gash Cadwy

had made in the side. Their previously muted screaming spilled out too, and the air was suddenly torn by the harrowing cries of these horribly injured people, men and women who had already made one great sacrifice. Cadwy made another long, horizontal slash along more than half the length of this tent with his blade, at waist height and to a part that was still supported, and this allowed easier access to the unfortunate people crushed and trapped within. More vitally, they could now access the horrendous, steaming and blood-soaked mess at the western end.

“Eirwen!” Cadwy croaked, stepping through the slashed canvas and looking around himself wildly in the muted light of this huge tent. Standing on the duckboards in the left aisle of this hospital, Cadwy stood between the beds of two shocked but undisturbed patients. “Eirwen!” He rasped at them again, his eyes blazing from the wet and horrific red mask of his face and driven wild by disbelief. “Where is Eirwen?” He shouted hoarsely now, but none responded, as the eyes staring back at Cadwy were huge and full of terror, terror of him! In the midst of battle, he was a ferocious and unknown warrior with steel in his fist, drenched in blood from head to foot and his eyes were screaming death, terrifying to silence all who beheld him. He turned to look across this tent and with the wild look still in his eyes, but now there were many hands arriving and flooding this sundered hospital tent. Soldiers, nurses, stewards and cooks were pulling and heaving the dead horses and the smashed chariot off the flattened and blood splattered canvas at the far end of this long tent, whilst others dragged the victims out from under it. Cadwy looked around himself frantically but still could not see Eirwen anywhere in this hospital tent, and with his mind reeling, he looked back at the horror of her little office. His stubborn disbelief finally cracked wide open, and with his last words to Eirwen echoing in his whirling mind, his world began to crumble. Staring bleakly at where he had last seen her and from where the indescribable and hideous mess of squashed limbs, smashed timber and broken people were being dragged from, his legs felt unreliable. He was undone where he stood, and he was weak at the thought of his irreplaceable Eirwen trapped under all that carnage. Hefin stepped

through the rent in the canvas at that moment, stooping into the diffused glow of the same interior. Looking at the collapsed end of this long tent, his pale and drawn face spoke volumes of the tragedy playing out here today, and he rested his hand on Cadwy's trembling left shoulder. His heart was breaking for himself but for his beloved combrogi mostly, and he had never experienced emotional pain like this before in all his young life. It felt as if a serrated blade had been plunged into his breastbone, and it was hard even to draw breath at that catastrophic and life changing moment. As a steaming and completely blood drenched Cadwy shook under his hand, Hefin could not stop the tears, and they fell from his face unabated.

"She was sitting right there Hef." Cadwy croaked, his haunted eyes ringed white through the horse's blood and glued balefully to the carnage ahead of them. "The last thing I said to her was stay here and don't move!" He sobbed, and Hefin's chin wobbled at this revelation, but more at the desolation in his prince's broken voice.

"You weren't to know Cadwy!" He breathed, staring at the shattered people being carried out from that mess, the frantic rescuers still struggling back toward Eirwen's flattened little office. "How could you?" He croaked to himself then, his emotions getting the better of him again as he stared forlornly at the same shocking destruction and death. Hefin's hot tears burned down his cheeks like lye, and he squeezed Cadwy's juddering shoulder hard, hanging his head in anguish, just not able to watch. Broken and blood splattered wicker chairs were being dragged from under that appalling mess of the crushed nurse's office now, and they awaited the dreaded, unthinkable and inconceivable moment as if suspended in a timeless, endless agony of both body and soul.

"Oh, Arglwydd Brigida! Don't just stand there you two. Do something!" Eirwen cried out in horror from behind them.

Cadwy joined his best friend then and he cried. Bending at the waist and putting his elbows on his knees, Cadwy rested his reeling, blood-soaked head in both his hands and he wept. He felt lightheaded and breathless,

but he had not turned around as he had no need to. His life was not over, the sun was back in his sky and his universe was whole once again. Beside him, Hefin's tears had turned to ones of the purest and irrepressible joy, as the Gods had plucked the blade from his breast in that instant. He turned to see the unique princess of Galedon standing there; the unsurpassable lady who owned a big part of all their hearts, and it was like a blessing from the Gods themselves. Eirwen stood crisply upright with a horrified look on her lovely face, all business and clutching a large wicker basket of clean dressings. Her living, flaming hair was bright copper bronze against the stark white linen of her coat, and Hefin started to laugh. He just could not help the sudden release of it, and he cried and laughed all at once, the tears pouring from his eyes. Eirwen frowned and stepped up to him smartly.

"Stop that nonsense Hefin! I thought better of you in such an emergency!" She scolded him. Hefin struggled to control himself, but his tears of joy were unbridled, and he kept crying and laughing all at once, being utterly speechless. Eirwen slapped his chest with a handful of linen towels and glowered at him. "And stop that ridiculous blubbing, it doesn't do anyone any good you know. Now follow me Hefin and try not to get in my way." She barked at him. Eirwen stopped alongside Cadwy briefly, who was still doubled over and coming to terms with the remission of his heart. Hefin stood entranced as Eirwen patted Cadwy gently on his back in passing. "You stay there darling if you're not up to helping, I'm sure your poor head still hurts." She offered sympathetically, hardly giving him a glance before forging ahead to where she was needed most, and Cadwy could not help it either then and he started to laugh. He fell to his knees, and he laughed quietly and painfully, holding his throbbing and bloody face in both hands. His tears of joy poured down his face, cleaning two pink rills through the congealing equine gore on his cheeks, but he was overjoyed. Cadwy sat heavily on the ground, leaning back against a hospital bed, and he watched through tear filled and bloodshot eyes as the love of his life and the most amazing person he had ever met take

control of this calamitous situation, and in moments everyone was jumping to her orders.

“Women get you like that son.” Came the gruff voice of the injured soldier whose bed he was leaning against, a man of senior years clearly, and one who spoke with the careful voice of the experienced.

Cadwy did not even look up or respond but he nodded, as he was learning fast.

“Wait ‘till you’ve had a few kids with them lad, they get much worse!” This unseen soldier advised him sagely and they both laughed then, together.



Chapter Nineteen.

Without a backward glance, Caesar moved his forces onto the great coastal promontory which had overlooked the pebble beach and which had beckoned to them for so long. He led them from this high headland east and toward the heart of Kantion, determined to cross its huge plain and to gain the southern shores of the Tamesa in the shortest possible time. They had barely marched ten miles when the forward scouts at the eastern head of this grassland spotted a great fracture in the ground ahead of them. A substantial river valley cut through this coastline they had been following, flowing from the distant hills to their left and running its winding course to the ocean down to their right. As the vanguard approached this huge crevice carved out of these clifftops, Caesar could see arrayed below him some kind of harbour. He had just been informed that the rude and filthy looking group of thatched dwellings, sprawled haphazardly around the timber wharfing below was known to the locals as their *Traîth Vyckan*. Their town of *Rutupia* was pointed out to him further downriver, being no more than a small village of ancient looking, enclosed thatches in reality. They were all in similar condition to their close neighbours below and set back from the river along its western bank. From this vaunted viewpoint, Caesar traced the glittering outline of this river and its ramshackle harbour which seemed to sit in a convoluted bend, and together, they looked like a drawstring bag on the green landscape below him. Informed that this broad, snaking river was called *Avon Dour*, in his estimation, this long stretch of winding and glinting water ran roughly two and a half miles to that outlying and smouldering town below. It looked to be a similar distance from the huddled community of Rutupia to the estuary of this river at the fractured, distant coastline. Fortuitously however, the Prittans had lined both banks of the river Dour below with long stretches of wharfing and for almost a mile, all backed by thatched stores and low hovels to service the same. There was

no main harbour as such, but there was enough area of high timber jetty lining both riverbanks to land over a dozen large ships at a time. Looking bitterly at this long and easily secured river harbour and its rough looking but serviceable timber wharfing, he realised that it would have made the perfect landing place for him, considering the type of ships he had built and all the landing practice he had forced upon his men. Another handful of miles further that day and things could have been so different. From this elevated perspective, Caesar could see that the mouth of this river actually lay east and behind the promontory of land that they had struggled toward the day of their landing, unseen from their viewpoint at the time and which seemed an age ago now. This broad, bifurcated plain overlooking the estuary where two of their large rivers found the great channel would be easily recognisable from a ship, and accessed far easier from a more easterly direction. Looking further out to the coast and to where this long, sinuous ribbon of water widened into the channel, the general could see that there were a few small islands braving the flow of that white flecked estuary which was flanked by broad sandy beaches. Two promontory fortresses guarded the mouth to either side of that distant river mouth, but they looked primitive and were no great obstacle. He committed all these details to memory nonetheless, but Caesar had soon seen enough of what he had missed that day, and he spat his frustration to the turf before wheeling his horse away with a scowl.

* * * * *

The crychiad was in an uproar, and it sounded like a Greek forum with everybody shouting and nobody listening. Ederus stood and called for calm as two other kings stood to support him from the head table on this broad dais, and in the face of this unassailable authority, this huge pencad pavilion eventually fell silent.

“Please ladies and gentlemen, let us at least hear the full report before we start throwing worthless accusations around. This war is not over, in fact it has not yet really begun!” The powerful king of Galedon said loudly from the top table, eyeing the sea of aristocratic but anxious faces before him.

“We have won a battle and proved that these Roman gelyn are human and eminently beatable, but that is all we have done!” Ederus told them bluntly, his bearded chin jutting. “The real war is yet to be won, and we all know of the wolf’s ability to turn even the tightest situation to his advantage, especially when things don’t go his way. So, we must uphold our unity above all else!” He added equally brusquely, and a serious look now took hold of this big northern king’s face. “All we know so far, is that they have broken free of their beachhead and are crossing Caint presently, as the honourless attack on our cadlys was obviously done as a diversion to allow the Romans their escape!” He informed these gathered nobles equally tersely, and the ignoble cursing bedlam returned, accusation and counteraccusation flying back and forth among this tense crowd. Ederus called again for order, and it took some minutes before he could speak again. When he could, he simply turned and bowed to King Caswallawn of the Southern Brythons alongside him, who now took centre stage.

“They can go nowhere my combrogi, as we have access to swifter, more direct routes and we may to some extent bring them to battle where we choose.” Caswallawn looked down his long nose at them all as Ederus retook his seat behind him, and many nodded back, as this much at least was widely known. “We were fortunate that our pendragon was abroad, and with a whole brigade of his finest soldiers no less when that shameful attack on our cadlys took place!” Caswallawn honoured Cadallan with the title and a curt bow. This lantern jawed, prime warrior smiled thinly back and returned the bow with the briefest of nods from his facing position. Cadallan stood and nodded, holding a hand up at the cheering and the polite applause around him, but he retook his seat and stayed silent as the king of the Southern Brythons continued from the dais. There had been a prominent seat set aside for him on that elevated platform alongside those monarchs, but Cadallan had chosen to sit at a front table in this vast pavilion alongside his senior officers.

“Was it not for the professionalism and the skill of your men Cadallan, the damage could have been far worse, but at least our veteran nobles had the glorious opportunity of wetting their honoured blades once more!” This broad-shouldered and notorious southern king added with a grin, finally getting a savage one in return from the square jawed Carfetan general. This huge canvas hall resounded to more cheering and loud applause in response, the loudest of which seemed to come from those very same veteran lords and ladies present, who were flushed with their glory and perhaps with the excellent *Caintish* mead which had been plentiful since battle’s end. Caswallawn turned to the pendragon of their armed forces again with another bow and an open hand, and the enormous general finally stood to resounding applause and with a pink neck, exposed by his short hair. Pendragon Cadallan ap Cadall bowed to all from the front of this crowd with his hand raised once more, and the mountainous *bri* about this grisly warrior was like Arglwydd Wyddfa herself. “Cadallan please.” Caswallawn invited him to speak with a smile and another nod, as these were old and much respected rivals.

Cadallan bowed formally to Caswallawn, Ederus and all the other kings on the dais before turning to address the noble crowd standing behind this row of tables reserved for the elite, and he bowed equally deeply to them all. Not a shred of emotion showed on his hard, dreadful face as he stood before and yet among them all, and he let his gimlet eyes sweep these courtiers for long moments before speaking.

“Our interrogations have revealed much.” This Carfetan general told them all bluntly in his deep rumble and with his prodigious, dimpled chin jutting. Every soul here knew the dark backdrop to those innocent sounding words, and you could have heard a pin drop to the boards. “There has been much treachery in our lands these past weeks, and a rebellion has grown from it to a point where it may even impact our allied defence of this country. This revolt was perpetrated by a number of dissatisfied Belgic tribes, and much filthy Roman gold has passed into their hands.” The general had to pause here at the resulting outburst, and he let it

subside normally before he continued, but he looked none too happy at the interruption. "Brythonic hands have also been sullied by the same ill-gotten gold, so let us please end this childish bickering, as it is entirely unseemly for an assembly of such esteemed and noble warriors."

Cadallan challenged them sourly, and this vast and jam-packed pavilion fell silent then as this man was not one to be ignored. "Our cross examinations also revealed that those rebellious, louse-ridden ruffians led by Commios were also deceived by that gwaen Caesar, as he was sworn to come to their aid and to wipe our cadlys out!" He held both enormous hands up to restore order from the uproar which followed these calamitous words, and he seemed to be struggling with his anger as these headstrong aristocrats were taking their own sweet time to settle back down. "Caesar chose to leave Commios and his vagabond army to their fate and to make his own cowardly escape!" He barked at them, finally restoring some order to these proceedings and their full attention back to him. "Commios escaped too, as did a few more of their leaders, but be assured my combrogi, each and every traitor will be brought to my justice." He glowered at all the kings, princes, lords and nobles in this great canvas hall as if some may yet be hiding among their number. "Caesar's every move is being observed, and at the correct moment we will bring him to battle, and we will destroy him." Cadallan told them this in such a matter-of-fact way, nobody thought of cheering. "He believes his gold has bought him shelter in the wild northern territories of Trinobanta of all places. Caesar has been offered safe passage through the lands of the Princes Aracorn and Duboric so that he may cross our holy Linn Tafwys, and he has been promised sanctuary at King Llwyd's CaerBera subsequently, all for the stuff of trinkets!" The grimace on his brutal face at that moment betrayed the disgust he felt at his own caustic words and at this unforgiveable betrayal of everyone here, for filthy lucre of all things. More boos and accusations interrupted him here and as a few beleaguered, Belgic allies in this crowd took the brunt of the abuse once more. Cadallan stared hard at these vociferous men and women then, and with the most murderous expression demonising his granite features. In

moments and with a few nudges between them, these complainants fell silent, looking nervously now at the fearsome pendragon before the dais.

“Thank you.” His rumble was caustic, and with his neck still pink with anger Cadallan scowled horribly at them all, looking as though he was about to pounce on them and throttle each one in turn. Cadallan straightened slowly and viewed these aristocratic people before him with an obvious disdain, crowded as they were into this stuffy pavilion before him. “Good King Afarwy has already dealt with two of those brigands, as his glorious new banner will admirably attest.” He grinned darkly now, looking down his long nose at these massed and allied people, and many laughed at this. “For those of you who have visited northern Trinobanta, you will know it will not be easy to winkle Caesar and his soldiers out of that rocky scrubland, especially if he builds one of his fortresses near CaerBera. If he achieves this and is then supported by further immigrants from Gaul, landed perhaps at Llwyd’s eastern Port of Ippys....” He let this appalling prospect hang in the air for a minute, and so they could absorb his gravelled words fully. “This cannot be allowed to happen!” He added lugubriously, pausing here to take a drink but holding their now silent gazes. “Caesar is not foolish enough to take on LludsDun.” Cadallan added once refreshed, and many nodded here in complete agreement, as it had little to do with the size of the caer emerging from the marshlands around Aber Tafwys. It had far more to do with the *size* of that huge fortress’ legendary owner, and it was this fact alone which made LludsDun formidable. The silver-handed owner in question stood listening to one side of this crowd, anonymously and in a hooded cloak, but he was smiling wickedly. “So, the Roman must cross the plain of Caint and he must bypass CaerCant, whose gates King Cyngetoric is sworn to keep closed due to Roman gold received.” Cadallan had to hold both hands up again here and he had to call loudly for order, as this was treason, and bedlam re-erupted in this animated gathering at his words. The resulting noise from his declaration of sedition was almost deafening, and there was some jostling in this noble assembly now. The noise was ramping up again

and a few of these Brythons were getting naturally aggressive, which was not wise in such a confined space.

“SILENCE!” Cadallan roared at them, making the air in this pavilion vibrate with his bellow, and with face and his square chin reddening ominously. Abruptly there was indeed a stunned silence in this tent. Most of these people were entirely unused to being spoken to in that way, but none felt the urge to complain at that moment as the pendragon’s warface had emerged, and people began to fidget under its withering gaze. Cadallan stood for long moments glowing redly and glowering at all of them, breathing deeply and composing himself, before he seemed able to continue without actually committing the murder that was blazing from his eyes. “Caesar plans to cross Fro Caint and then gain the western shore of the Tafwys. He believes he will be able to cross our sacred Linn at CaerDorbruff and from the shoreline of its long peninsula.” He told them, the blood fading from his demonised features now as he regained some of his composure, but he still scanned the many faces in this crowd with anger still rumbling in his cavernous chest. “My sister and six of her handmaidens could defend the narrow neck of that peninsula.” Cadallan informed them ruefully, breaking the tension. Some laughed at this, but they also knew that it was probably true knowing the Carfetau. “But we know Carfillios has taken Caesar’s gold and his gates would remain closed, allowing the Romans access to his isthmus, and there I’m sure they could find a mercenary guide to help them across the Tafwys, to Trinobanta and beyond.” His eyes hardened here as he expected another outburst, but none came as this man’s reputation was notorious, and he was clearly still livid. “These at least are what we have discovered to be the Roman’s goals and expectations. Obviously this cannot be allowed to happen, and much has already been put in place to this end.” Cadallan added confidently in his rumbling bass, nodding now and clearly pleased at the order he now commanded. “Be assured good Prydeinig that things will not work out quite as planned for the Roman invader, as the honourable king of Caint is our sworn ally and always has been!” He declared loudly, and as the confused sound from the audience increased,

a wintry smile broke out across the general's face. "King Cyngetoric of Caint has played puppet master in our deception of the Roman, and Caesar's gold along with his bold plans were brought to us by our loyal ally!" He told them this now with the chilling smile still in place, and the atmosphere was suddenly lifted. Wild cheering broke out, and many trusted Belgic nobles coloured but stood proud as their royal countryman was brought forward through the entrance to receive his acclamation and his bri among the great Brythonic kings at the head table and on the dais before them. King Cyngetoric looked magnificent on the dais as he bowed graciously at the loud applause and unrestrained cheering from these diverse nobles. Tall and regal with his voluminous moustaches trimmed neatly, and with the spiked crown of Caint gleaming like metal butter on his noble head in this torchlight, he smiled back at all these wildly celebrating people. Cadallan allowed this ovation to swell, joining the other nobles in this pavilion and applauding the Belgic king himself before he called for order again, and before continuing strongly in this heightened mood.

"Caesar expects Cyngetoric's great CaerCant to be neutral as he takes the field on Fro Caint and so that he may pass north to Carfillios' CaerDorbruff unmolested, but wise Cyngetoric had all these treacherous acts observed. Carfillios rests in the dungeon of CaerCant as we speak, and Cyngetoric's soldiers hold CaerDobruff as they also hold the now heavily fortified neck to that peninsula. Caesar will never lay his treacherous, covetous eyes on the sacred waters of Arglwydd Tafwys, as it is tomorrow, on the lush grasses of Fro Caint that the Wolf of Rome will face his doom!" This huge and granite faced general roared, his colour rising once more, and the chaos which shook the canvas walls of this huge tent returned like a storm of warlike ambition. The sound was almost deafening, as hundreds of beer logs were crashed to the timber tabletops amid a bedlam of raw shouting and riotous yelling.

“Let’s get out of here Eirwen.” Cadwy offered, steering her out of this airless and noisy pavilion, which was packed to capacity and had become suddenly very boisterous and chaotic.

Once outside, the fresh and cool air was like a tonic to them both, and the tension from the great ongoing war council finally began to dissipate as they wandered away from it. They walked aimlessly across this huge camp, hand-in-hand in the early evening and as the commotion from the great *cadlys* rose and fell behind them. The temperature was finally dropping, becoming more comfortable for all especially her patients in the repaired hospital, and it was a blessing.

“Your eyes look clearer today, and the bruising is finally going down.” Nurse Eirwen informed him, inspecting his face around the small dressing. A druid had made sacrifice to Arglwydd Brigida the healer on his behalf, and thankfully there was no corruption in his wound. Cadwy had inspected the impressive wound himself earlier, and looking in Eirwen’s beloved hand-held mirror, he could see that the livid and stitched scar looked less angry and the flesh beneath it less swollen today, but more importantly, Eirwen had been happy with its healing progress. It ran in a jagged curve from the outer orbit of his left eye and over the eyebrow before it split into a ‘y’. The lower cut, kinked across the bridge of his nose, whilst the upper scar ran across his forehead to end an inch over his right eyebrow. He had not thought anything of it really, nor how it now made him look, he was just glad that it had not become corrupted and that the pain had eased. The tightness of the skin around the wound had caused a few headaches, but this tautness had relaxed somewhat now and the headaches were thankfully a thing of the past.

The Albion refectory tent lay ahead of them now, to their right around this great tented village, and as they headed down this pathway of crushed grass toward it and between the rows of tall and roaring torches, they were completely wrapped up in themselves. Eirwen took his arm in hers and rested her head against his shoulder as they strolled down this

temporary trail accompanied by a looming series of their own stepping shadows.

“Will you be there tomorrow?” She asked him quietly, not able to look up at him, but she could not disguise the apprehension in her voice as she clung to his arm.

“Yes my love. I assume I will lead a regiment of my Selgofau spearmen alongside my tad with his *Plufyn* and Berwyn’s *Claws*, but I’m not sure of the battle order yet until our own briefing later.” He replied neutrally beside her and with a pragmatic shrug of his mouth.

“Be careful darling, but if you do have to fight.” She stopped then and took his face carefully in her cool hands, her fantastic emerald eyes blazing with a fierce intensity into his. “Fight like Arglwydd Camulo himself, with the cunning of Arglwydd Cornonnyn and with the strength of Lug Ddu Fawr.” She growled at him, her face animated, and with her glorious green eyes blazing into his. “Slaughter all who dare come near the notorious *Lladdwyr y Canwriad*, the infamous Tywysog; Prince Cadwy ap Cridas the centurion slayer! Beloved of his cyfail, his family, his people, and the woman who will be his wife and bear his many children!” She snarled this at him like a highland lioness and with her eyes blazing, inches from his and Cadwy swallowed, his own eyes becoming huge, as the awesome and belligerent side of this wondrous warrior-woman was completely unfamiliar to him. But the last word had struck home like a dart through his lovestruck pondering, and he smiled broadly, even as his face hurt.

“Our children?” He breathed, and Eirwen rolled her eyes at him.

“Oh, Cadwy darling, you do say some silly things sometimes.” She giggled. “Who else’s?”

“How many shall we have my love?” Cadwy recovered his wits and a little of his pride, but he still looked a bit dazed and wide eyed at her.

“Ooh I don’t know, five or six? Maybe more, we shall have to see!” She said mysteriously, arching one eyebrow. They both laughed, but it was not the free and spirited laughter they usually shared, as the black wings of war still flapped unseen and unheard above them in the starlit heavens.

“Dinner?” Cadwy asked her then, as they had reached a crossroads in these downtrodden pathways in the grass, and to their right now was the refectory glowing in welcome allure, whilst further on and to their left was where Cadwy’s private tented lodgings had been erected. Eirwen looked at him then and with an old-fashioned look, and she put her hand on her stomach, smiling *that* smile of hers.

“I am thinking about my tummy Cadwy, but perhaps not in the way you think.” She said seriously and even more mysteriously, making Cadwy frown, as there was altogether another look in her almond eyes now, and he could swear they had just changed in hue. “I was thinking of perhaps making a start on those five or six.” She advised him directly, holding his gaze steadily.

It was not until she pulled him by the hand and led him down the lefthand lane that the acorn finally dropped. Cadwy’s neck flushed a treacherous pink, but Eirwen was no longer pulling him.



Chapter Twenty.

They had marched about six miles this morning already after breaking their overnight camp, and Caesar had pushed them hard. They arrived now at a broad plain of long cleared land which was uneven and tussocked and had the lush, sprouting growth of poorly drained ground. On their march of escape the previous day, they had discovered by the unmistakeable tracks in the dirt that Prittanic chariots had been ridden through their own Kantish villages and farmsteads, driving the livestock and the civilians out and up into the hills. This had clearly been done to deny the Roman foragers, and it was either surprising contingency planning or superb communication and lightning reactions on the part of those uncivilised barbarians, nobody could quite figure out which. The stinking remains of many crop fields still smouldered and smoked heavily on this bright and blustery morning, creating a stark recollection of their dreadfully slaughtered comrades, and giving them too a salutary reminder that the Prittans were never far away. The wind whipping off the sea to their right was brisk and refreshing to marching men however, and now sustained and freed from the killing pebbles of their beachhead, the morale and the spirits of these miles gregarii had been lifted immeasurably.

Caesar was in deep thought as one of his long scouts came galloping in, informing him and his staff that the so-called *Vroe* or Vale of Kantion began over a large stream ahead, and that the broad plain beyond looked deserted. A shallow crossing at this unknown stream was pointed out before the rider departed, back to his duties. The moment approached swiftly now; the moment when Caesar would know for sure. He would discover if his gold and his promises of much more of the same had actually bought him neutrality and free passage across this huge tract of

land ahead, or he would find that he had spent it on subterfuge, duplicity and ambush, it was all up in the air at this point. He was the world's original realist, and he was keenly aware that there would be no way of knowing until he was fully committed. With a wry smile and a frustrated spit to the grass, he acknowledged that he had been thus committed from the moment he had first boarded his lost bireme at Portus Itius. Looking at his reduced legions now which he had also so fatally dedicated to this self-motivated invasion, he saw that they were marching past him in immaculate form as they all knew his eyes were upon them. This ever-familiar thumping, crunching and clanking sound of thousands of marching men was music to Caesar's ears and to his soul, and he smiled thinly to Labienus, his old Patrician friend who was sitting easily in his saddle and coolly inspecting the troops passing from the roadside at their left flank. His legate and sub-commander was his most valuable remaining asset, and this irreplaceable man nodded back to him confidently before returning to his business-like scrutiny of the men filing past. Past him now rode Domitus, his senior tribune and 2nd in command of the 10th. Cantering behind him sat the highly decorated but wounded Marcus Paulinus Lollius, his first-file centurion. Caesar had elevated that huge, impressive man himself to 'primi ordine', making him commander and champion of the 1st and double-sized cohort of his 10th *Equestris*, and elevating him to the most ranked and decorated champion in this army at the same event. Sadly, Lollius had taken a stray arrow in his right bicep on the day of landing and was greatly reduced by the injury. Alongside this injured veteran rode his now subordinate Centurion Verus, commander of the 2nd of the 10th. To these officer's right rode Gaius Crastinius, the senior centurion of the 1st of the 7th along with Caesar's great-nephew and Junior Tribune Lucius Pinarius Scarpus. These were the only officers which remained of his invasion force, apart from the redoubtable figure of Marcus Vitruvius Mamurra. This rotund and bull-necked man rode alongside Lollius and Verus, the brutally capable prime centurions and his two drinking and gaming partners. This was his surviving corps of officers, and Caesar's confidence was somewhat restored as he recalled all the

things he had achieved with these hugely experienced and battle-hardened men. Spurring this unfamiliar horse, he re-joined the head of his much-reduced army, and to the rhythmic sound of these marching men, they began to cross the stream ahead at the shallows, and the water was turned brown with their passing.

* * * * *

The encompassing forests around this huge plain were silent now, as everything living wild among them had fled. Innumerable armoured and armed warriors shimmered in polished steel and flecks of colour in the dark spaces between the surrounding tall oaks and the dense stands of old pines. Many were mounted and mail clad, but most were standing where they had assembled in their everyday clothing between these groups of noble riders, ten reeds back from the treeline as instructed, armed to the teeth and all awaiting what this ruddy day would bring.

King Nynniaw ap Beli Mawr sat astride a magnificent black stallion with a snowy blaze down his long face, mostly hidden today by a fantastic bronze *chamfrein*. This bronze, equine face guard was a stunning creation in itself, superbly cast in a golden alloy with swirling, interlocking designs, all deeply embossed and engraved into the polished contours of the surface. The two almond eyeholes in this priceless chamfrein were things of great beauty, and a reed long spiral of white enamelled horn emerged from the forehead between them, giving this stallion the appearance of a mythical unicorn. Nynniaw, the acknowledged sword champion of all Prydein looked magnificent on the stallion's back, and he was resplendent in the most stunning Gorddofic armour with the *war-hammer* cygil proud on his shield and his breastplate for all to see. His marvellous helmet with its gold crest topped it all, and Nynniaw simply shone in the dappled sunlight among these trees. His princely *dewin* son sat alongside him, and Crown Prince Gwerdded ap Nynniaw ap Beli Mawr glowed in his almost matching armorial splendour. To Nynniaw's right hand was the unmistakeable mounted form of his brother and the high king of the Khumry; Lludd Llaw Ereint on his utterly black charger. This impressive

man sat in a long and black, sable cloak clasped with a weighty silver chain around his neck, and this worn over superb and highly polished mail armour over plaid bracs and jerkin in a dark, almost black weave for this day of days. The heir to Beli Mawr wore no helm today but had the pristine mail hood of his fabulous *llurig* coat thrown over his leonine head. With silver war hammers and swirling designs chased into the sculpted surface of his breastplate and the long black cavalry shield in his silver hand, Lludd looked magnificent and deadly all at once. The large, silver *war-hammer* pommel of his legendary sword glinted in the same leafy sunlight as his thoroughbred horse shifted under him. Thousands of indentured Khumric soldiers filled this forest alongside and behind these infamous Gorddofic warlords, all stout and seasoned killers with their drooping moustaches and their red dragon tattoos, each clasping a red dragon shield and a long, very sharp spear. The legendary Essyllwyr had gleefully come east and southeast to southern Prydein in their droves to kill Romans, and on this misty morning, these allied warriors of the sacred mother country were ready for anything. A large and darkly mantled brigade of *black-shield* warriors, adorned proudly with their black fox fur armbands were grouped to one side with a few wilder looking shield-less men among them. These were King Berian's *shadow-stalkers*, making a savage contribution to the war effort from Demeta and Wythona. Strangely, these seasoned killers looked to be the most rested among this Khumric host, as for some reason unknown to the rest of this huge army, they were already in southern Prydein when the clarion call to march had rung through the valleys and the hills of Khumry.

To the north and almost facing this Khumric host stood the massed ranks of Galedon, and with four thousand spearmen of Ederus' host spaced out behind the horses of the notorious *Gŵyrd y Gogledd*, Galedon was poised. They were supported by eight hundred of the ferocious and much-feared Gadwyr, who, for tactical reasons and to their unconcealed chagrin were to be held in reserve this day. To the west of this great army and equally concealed were the assembled warriors of Albion, and Cridas had brought his son and two thousand seasoned spearmen of Selgofau to the field,

with a thousand of his own highly specialised *quills of the boar*. An equal number of Prince Berwyn's *claws of the bear* with their unique sickles had also made the journey with him, along with thirty-three of his clattering carbads of rolling death. Breged stood across this vast plain, barely a quarter mile from this shaded Khumric host, and they had a thousand of the impressive and unrelenting Carfetau in their vanguard, arrayed around Pendragon Cadallan ap Cadall, High King Bellnor and all his Bregedian gŵyrd. Wrought by the hammers of their blacksmiths, shining rows of mounted and metalled, human forms winked among those distant trees, and this imposing force was led by the legendary commanding officer of this huge, surrounding allied army; their ferocious *pendragon* for this historic gathering, and all here hoped the great man would gain the supremely honourable pre-title of *Uthr* in the forthcoming battle. A vassal alliance of a further thousand Paurisan, Lupocaran and Gabrantofican spearmen and many more doughty warriors were arrayed around him, under and around their own minor banners. Pennants of *wolf*, *viper* and *war-horn* flapped imperiously in the breeze alongside *bronze-swords* and *crossed-swords*, and all were proudly held aloft by these eager and excited men, who waited silently and stoically under their flags for the battle to come. Pendragon Cadallan sat easily on his warhorse below a magnificent and enormous red dragon banner, made for this war only but proudly displayed nonetheless alongside the leaping deer flag of his House. The huge and terrifying red dragon emblazoned across his new flag was not the sinuous, artistic interpretation of the Essyllwyr, far from it. His was a horn bristling, ferocious, fire breathing and armour-plated monstrosity, and it had a cavernous mouth which was filled with huge and razor-sharp, gleaming white fangs. The colossal red beast curving among those heavy folds was armed with the most enormous, equally gleaming and curving claws which could clearly tear a man apart. The pendragon's huge banner displayed a monstrous and blood red, coiled and scaly beast of nightmare at its heart, and it even struck fear into his allies. Cadallan sat proudly beneath its terror, his great bulwark of a dimpled chin jutting

belligerently over his leaping deer breastplate as he coolly surveyed Fro Caint below him, suppressing his building impatience.

King Caswallawn's army were holding ground east from CaerCaint, encamped in the broad swath of land which fell away between that fortress and the coast, and due to its seaward slope it rendered his huge army unseen from the plain. He had brought two thousand of his highly trained *bronze-shield* gŵyrd here, and they were supported by six hundred of Dug Fawr Dodion ap Dygweullo's warriors, who had come from the very toe of Prydein under their *sword and war-horn* banner of the Cornafau Dde, and so the Southern Brythons were too poised and ready. The Grand Duke Dodion's late father Dygweullo ap Eneid was brother to the equally late Manogan Fawr, Beli Mawr's equally infamous father, and Dodion was a highly respected warlord of wide reputation in his own right. Duke Dodion had brought with him his renowned gŵyr and many of his valiant troops, and these hardy, powerful men mixed easily with the assorted hosts of spearmen and women and sword masters from across these southern territories. Also gathered here in support of Caswallawn were banners as diverse as his *lynx, otters, falcons, a cougar* and even a *mole* was represented here by two hundred doughty warriors of the Dufnoniau, all standing calmly under their small but proudly borne vassal flag. An enormous reserve of allied troops was held in another huge and recently cleared area of woodland nearby, as if all were brought together this day the Brythonic forces would massively outnumber the enemy by about ten to-one. These reserves would be held strictly at bay by their leaders, as the Brythons' well-known penchant for all out, mindless attack had to be curbed. If all were engaged at once within the paddocked restrictions of Fro Caint, it would end in certain chaos. The battle order had been drawn up by Cadfridog Cadallan and the five kings, who had explained it thoroughly to their officers and tribal leaders, to be further disseminated by them. The plan needed to be followed precisely if their forces were to engage the Romans effectively, as uncoordinated and unstructured attack was something they infamously excelled in defending and defeating. The Brythons had learned much from these gelyn, not least

to take them on with some structure and form, long enough to break their formations anyway, after that, things would develop the way they had always done. The resulting slaughter would be great and joyous, chaotic and absolute. However, *breaking* the Roman formations was and always had been the part which had proved so difficult, almost impossible to their wilder, more recklessly uncoordinated Gallic cousins. Having learned a great deal from the heroic exploits of the now allied and two most northerly nations of this country and a certain young Selgofan crown prince who led them, and whose notoriety was blossoming across Prydein, a great deal of these Brythons' efforts were bent toward a structured goal when they eventually brought their enemy to battle once more. Scouts had followed the Romans' steady progress east across the vibrant and green lands of Caint, and these bold invaders were clearly trying to gain the western shore of the Tafwys. Pendragon Cadallan had pushed his allied army hard to position them here in their formations and to bring Caesar to battle long before they could reach that sacred river. Several staged points on the north-eastern route to water had been garrisoned and fortified, the last of these being the barricaded neck of the Dortbruff Peninsula itself, but first the yellow dog of Rome would have to vanquish all the pendragon's allied forces gathered here to prevent him before even reaching the first of these great obstacles. Fro Caint had been given the opposite treatment all around the hilltop fortress at its heart, as its outlying stock fields had been stripped of almost everything. The outer region of this huge and fortified dale had long been sectioned into several large fields with dense blackthorn hedging, all surrounding the fortress at the large and cleared centre of this maes, and all themselves surrounded by vibrant green forests. These massive paddocks had been established long ago to secure the stock and the horses of CaerCaint, but these were all empty today. The double gates had been removed from all the access points to this broad and sectioned maes, as had all the individual gates to the paddocks within, all in preparation for this battle to come.

Almost two hundred carbads were mounted and ready inside the great fortress of CaerCant and the sounds of jingling kit and bridles, jostling

wicker cars and the great shuffling of impatient hooves was constant as these nobles awaited the call to arms in their ostentatious vehicles of war on this huge parade ground. Belgic King Cyngetoric sat easily at the head of this fleet of vehicles and horsemen on his own mount and in his old-fashioned armour, minus the spiked crown of state and with a brassy looking, ancient and tattily plumed helmet perched on his head in its stead. He awaited the signal to throw his gates open and to release a flood of these rattling and banging vehicles of death, to go clattering down his broad ramp beyond those massive gates and to the turf below in arms.

In the heart of this great palisaded fortress, being the hilltop capital of the besieged kingdom of Caint this day there was erected a strange construction. Assembled before King Cyngetoric on his parade ground were the *Chwaeroliaeth Wyllt*, who prepared themselves now for battle in their own sacred and private conclave which the king had set up on this sandy quadrangle for them. This sanctified ring was surrounded by hundreds of jostling and moving chariots, horses and men, but it had been enveloped by a great circle of stitched sheets of white linen, seven feet in height and mounted on tall poles to allow them the concealment they needed for their ancient rites. Voluminous clouds of aromatic and pungent smoke wafted over this tall, white circle of curtain, and it was redolent with the herbal weed the 'Spiritual Sisterhood' smoked through their noses within, in long slender pipes and with large bowls. These small, dried buds they smoked were infused with countless minute crystals and were known as *cywarch benyweg*, and these were harvested from a special strain of the *cywarch* plant the Brythons normally used for making their bowstrings and 'hemp' ropes. The females of this ancient land-race species, once separated from the males and allowed to form unfertilised calyxes, would, at the end of summer produce a resinous and herbal medicine which had been used for innumerable years by the healers of this great country and many others. Much careful selection and seeding by the *chwaeroliaeth wyllt* had, over the years developed a highly potent and effective medicinal strain of this ancient plant. This portentous

morning, this unique, 'wild sisterhood' held glowing embers to the equally glowing bowls of their pipes and inhaled great lungful's of this redolent smoke through their noses, as their mouths had been forever sealed.

The Shahansha's countless warriors of mighty Persia, the Carthaginians, the Assyrians and the Anatolians were all known to consume this medicinal herb regularly before battle, as were many eastern nations, and most Gallic tribes were also known to use it as a medicine. Most Brythons used *cywarch benyweg* to control pain, especially arthritic pain in the elderly, but it was also commonly used to stimulate appetite and to aid restful sleep. The *chwaeroliaeth wyllt* used this herbal medicine in the same way as the Persians did, for war. It allowed them to commune with their fierce Goddess of war before they were finally presented to her. It helped them prepare for battle and certain death in *Her* name, whilst helping them to remain calm and focused in their one and only conflict. This 'wild sisterhood' were always druid led and inspired, and it was HênDdu himself who today dedicated and sanctified these ninety-nine spiritual female warriors. Supported by the Ladies Meleri and Karych; the two arch-druidens of all Prydein, these three senior priests together would convey their sacred declarations to their Goddess Andras Fawr as they battled the foreign invaders with no thought of survival, in *Her* name. The *chwaeroliaeth wyllt* were tasked with *first contact*, even before the packs of great slaving war hounds were released as they always had been in war. These completely naked, suicidal spirit warriors would attack first as was their long and honourable tradition, and as a spiritual, *Brythonic* introduction to what was soon to follow. These courageous women were all generational volunteers who had already brought children into this world, and would today fight unclothed, with a bronze torc around their necks and only a single short sword to fight with. The torcs were hollow bronze rather than the solid gold reserved for royalty, but they still showed the reverence and respect given to these fierce warriors, the mature and the young alike. Their lips had been sewn up with silver wire so they could not utter any sounds or screams, and their bare bodies had been painted by the acolytes of the uati with the blue woad swirls and

patterns that pleased their Goddess, and which ensured a glorious and conspicuous death. Each had a white skull mask painted on their faces in lime, to signify their sacred status and to show that each was marked for holy sacrifice. Mistletoe was woven into their braided hair which declared that they belonged to these druids, and these ultimately courageous, spiritual she-warriors prayed now on their knees and with bloodshot eyes. They prayed to their fierce and warlike Arglwydd Andras; their beloved deity. They would dedicate and sacrifice their lives to *Her* this day and to the defence of Arglwydd Prydein. They would precede the main, manic onrushing attack of the tribes just as their honoured predecessors have always done. All will die as expected, but songs and englyns are sung about the most successful of these religiously inspired warriors and will be unto the end of days.

Their most lauded and most infamous *chwaer* was one Gawres Cyllt, a phenomenal woman warrior who is deeply honoured to this day, and who long-ago personified their fierce and terrible Goddess. Sister Cyllt had cut great swathes of enemy spearmen down many years ago, spinning and pirouetting gracefully before inevitably she had been brought down. She was soon slaughtered, and her painted body then pierced with so many spears her form had resembled a giant hedgehog. One mindless enemy had done the unthinkable, however. One idiotic, mead addled, and long forgotten individual had cut off the head of this legendary heroine, throwing it out over the shield wall with a curse, back into no-man's land. A howl of enraged and deranged disbelief had broken from the main body of her tribe at such unbelievable profanity, as only a druid or druiden could touch the body of a slain sister without incurring the displeasure of the Goddess Andras and all the implacable deities of Prydein, but to decapitate her in that sacrilegious way was nothing short of desecration. It had turned the tide in that battle that day so long ago, and it had cemented Cyllt's place in Brythonic history and legend. Eventually, the songs of the bards would have the listener believe that she slew forty armoured men that day before being brought down, but whatever the truth, her name is still revered centuries after her long-forgotten

contemporaries and her anonymous abuser have faded into the mists of time.

These wire-lipped and painted warriors now smoked their weed, held their arms wide and pleaded for the blessings of Arglwydd Andras Fawr in this sacred white circle, and with the aid of the brif-druid of Prydein himself and his two arch-druidens all praying in harmony, their success was assured. Each and every one of these gods-sworn and blue painted sisters were utterly convinced, that in view of this most revered and all-powerful group facilitating their connection, they will be curled up at the feet of their much-worshipped Goddess within the hour.

A long and deep, base lowing of familiar horns wafted over these palisades on the air then, and all-around King Cyngetoric became animated, the bumping and jostling sounds behind the king becoming louder, and some of the pent-up, harnessed horses of his aristocrats began to snort and to throw their heads about in impatience. Stewards rushed to dis-assemble the holy linen circle and to release the now sanctified *Sisters* within, as that long awaited signal informed everyone here that the *Wolf of Rome* had appeared from the southwest at last and had finally taken the field. It also signalled that it was the time for action, which in some way even the horses understood.

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Caesar led his remaining army of almost five thousand troops onto the brow of a low hill overlooking the primary vale of Kantion now on the promise of a foreign and black toothed king. The fortress of Karr Kant did indeed sit on a low hilltop centrally in this vast plain as described by that exiled rogue, but the surrounding ground had been sectioned off into stock fields around the large primary clearing, complicating its approach. Delimited by thick and impenetrable blackthorn hedging, these outlying stock fields were themselves surrounded by the dense and ubiquitous forests of this maddening country. Fortunately, the fortress on the hill did look to be locked up and silent in the centre of Vroe Kant as promised and as paid for, just as its battlements seemed as deserted as these huge

fields around it. As the Romans moved to pass through the first great stockade and toward the south-eastern corner of this plain, Caesar could not tear his eyes from the distant fringes of the forests surrounding this huge and divided bowl of land he had entered. The horses seemed nervous as they whinnied and flicked their ears, and this was not lost on Caesar or his officers.

“Keep your eyes open everybody!” The general called out, his senses suddenly coming alive. He did not much like the uneasy atmosphere of this place, as it had a hushed and pensive quality about it that lifted the hairs on his arms. He could hear his centurions barking out orders for the men to dress and to stay in tight formation behind him. Many men behind him in this marching host eyed the quiet and seemingly inactive hillfort of Karr Kant to their front and distant left as they traversed this lumpy field, and others studied the surrounding forests with equal suspicion as they all marched toward the opposite gateway and the vast clearing beyond. They had crossed a set of ancient, long rounded berms and ditches halfway across this large paddock when the Prittans made their first appearance and to the sound of a distant horn. The far fringes of this encompassing forest came alive then and with the glinting of long-haired warriors in mail, some on horseback but most were on foot. There was some fidgeting in the ranks at the sight of so many Prittanic warriors however outlying, but none were forming up in opposition and so they marched onwards. The far distant trees all around were filling with warriors, but there seemed to be no organised defence being thrown up to block their advance. Caesar may have expected as much even with free passage, as every living person in this territory would have turned out to witness this event, which still left matters largely undecided. The way ahead through this field and into the central arena, and their subsequent route to the south-eastern passage around this fortress remained however, and Caesar pressed on regardless as many more Prittanic warriors revealed themselves to the south and southeast, and to the flanks. The general felt a prickle of foreboding as he led his men out of this huge, empty cattle field and forward into the huge bowl of land around its central hill, feeling

vaguely that he was being herded, but he dismissed this fleeting notion, and gripping his golden idol of Fortuna tightly under his cape, he suppressed his mounting fears. Determined to give that fortress a wide berth, the narrowed formations passed through the gateless gap in this thick hedge behind their general, and at a barked order from the primus pilli, they wheeled a quarter turn right in well-rehearsed form around the rectangular perimeter of this central arena, and so that they were now heading slightly downhill and directly toward the bottom right and the south-eastern corner of this whole plain. This route would lead them down and around this huge central space, and there was almost half a mile of this denuded ground to negotiate before the hedgerow to the other stock fields began, and where they would turn left and head north back uphill, circumventing Karr Kant. Remaining in these narrowed but elongated formations, they crossed the southern perimeter of this central arena and headed east across this broad space, but then a great and ominous clunking sound came from the huge twin gates of that hilltop fortress. All eyes turned to watch as those tall and black gates swung pendulously open and the distant, palisaded and previously deserted battlements of that fortress began to fill with warriors. Moments later, dozens upon dozens of pairs of horses sped down from that stronghold, towing behind them the old-fashioned but speedy and eminently dangerous, two-man and clearly Trojan inspired war chariots of these wild Prittans. With thundering hooves and whooping occupants, fully manned and armed, they streamed down the ramp from the gates of that fortress and onto the grass of this central arena with a loud series of bangs and rattles which carried clearly to these deeply concerned Romans. Caesar knew then for certain as those thudding and clattering sounds reached him that his gold had been squandered and that he had been betrayed and ambushed.

“Battle formations!” He roared, and his men began to form up to meet this onslaught, but rather than charge straight at them with the reckless abandon expected, these chariots approached to just out of javelin range at a sedate trot and then split their formation into an avenue revealing a strange and exotic sight to these Romans. About a hundred, completely

naked women strode forth between this rolling honour guard, and each was painted in the fantastic blue, whirling symbols and patterns so clearly loved by these uncivilised people. Each female warrior wore a metal torque around her neck, and it looked as though all they carried in arms was a foot long blade.

“Well gentlemen, it looks like the entertainment has finally arrived.” Mamurra chortled this just yards from Caesar, and this broke the spell these naked female warriors had created, and the officers all laughed. The tension released in them all then, and their soldiers began to rotate their muscular shoulders and swing their arms about, preparing themselves for the warm work which approached along with these blue swabbed and skull faced Prittanian women. The one priest who had survived thus far drew near to Caesar then and spoke quietly to him, and the general nodded at his advice. These naked warriors had approached calmly to within forty yards before Centurion Gaius Crastinius yelled; ‘Ad aciem et pilli parati’, but Caesar quickly overrode his commands.

“No pilli Crastinius if you please. Apparently they are sacred warriors, and I want you to chop them to pieces with your gladii!” He ordered his men. “They are merely women and young girls, and one oyster picker is all they are armed with, and so I want you to make an example of them. Show these mindless barbarians the worth of Rome’s steel! Cut them down with your swords gentlemen and then decapitate each and every one, as it will be a spiritual blow to these cave-dwellers and good warm up exercise for the work to come!” He told them with a dangerous smile, and his men roared their assent.

“Look at the tits on that one!” Came a guttural voice from the front ranks, and none of these imperious officers at the front needed to turn around, and many enlisted soldiers behind them joined in the resulting laughter at this notorious soldier’s acute observation.

The javelins were put to one side, and the front ranks prepared themselves for sport as these naked, blue she warriors suddenly broke into a run toward them. As they neared, the Romans saw that the lips of

each white, death skull mask had been wired shut, and it made them open their eyes in surprise. Their astonishment was doubled in a heartbeat, when at the very point of contact these courageous women warriors leapt into the air in front of them and simply vanished. These muted, female fighters somersaulted over their heads to engage their comrades behind, many being thrown into the air by two comrades. The shocked soldiers in the second and third ranks were stunned by the miraculous arrival of these wire lipped and red eyed, blue painted and somersaulting killers among them, and these were the ones who died first. These naked dervishes were spinning blue nightmares of valiant flashing and killing steel, and they were as agile as hummingbirds but equally vulnerable. Inevitably they succumbed one by one, furiously but silently. The two front ranks of legionaries carried out their orders and put them to the sword, chopping these fragile, spiritual warriors to pieces. As each sister was decapitated to Caesar's personal orders and their white painted, blood dripping heads held high, a massive roar of abject horror and protest came from around the furthest fringes of this broad plain like the angry rumbling of some huge yet hidden monster. As if in answer to this vengeful murmuring all around them and to another mournful call of a distant and foreign horn, hundreds of lithe, undulating beasts broke the trees from around three sides of that fortress, and these ferocious looking animals tore across the ground toward them now at a blistering pace. Almost the size of small ponies, these speeding creatures were fully seventy yards away before it was clear what attacked them next, and it terrified some of the men in the front ranks. Hundreds of huge, snarling and cropped haired dogs of enormous proportion were tearing toward them, fearsomely hugging the ground like the terrible hounds of Dis himself, and it took huge courage to stand and to receive them. In moments, these snarling and leaping wardogs had launched themselves into their ranks like crazed beasts with huge, flashing and snapping teeth. Chaos ensued, and the Romans battled these crazed and heavily muscled hounds with spears and swords and anything else they had to hand. Pandemonium took hold in the first ranks as men fought for their lives

against these huge and ferocious creatures, many of which attacked in wild and unpredictable ways and were extremely strong and agile despite their uncommon size. Some men were literally torn apart by trained pairs of these fearsome dogs and to the most harrowing screaming. Blood seemed to fly into the air in great splashes as limbs were ripped from screeching men, and others were eviscerated in seconds. In this mounting panic amid tremendous growling and agonised screaming, each man strove to protect his battle brother with all his might. The pili proved the most effective weapon against these monstrous hounds, but even as these muscular wardogs were mortally wounded and speared, they stubbornly battled on, slavering and snapping their great teeth at anything that moved. They were eventually all slaughtered to much more sprayed blood and canine screaming, but not before a great many of Caesar's soldiers had been severely injured and more than fifty mortally wounded in the melee. A few men had been literally torn to pieces by these great beasts, and Caesar's German boar hounds had been in their own battle. Negrus Alto lay dead with his body torn open, and Negrus Primo stood forlornly over him, panting, trembling and bleeding but alive, and Caesar was thankful for it.

"Left flank!" A centurion roared, and Caesar's horrified gaze was torn from his own battered pair of fighting dogs, just as an *ebeneator* blew a sharp tone in confirmation from their flank. His narrowed eyes were drawn to a brigade sized mass of warriors which had taken the field from the west. They had followed on the heels of these terrible wardogs and had been jogging steadily toward them as the chaos ensued in his ranks. These similarly lightly armed and new warriors to the field approached at a trot, and Caesar could see that they were men and looked normal enough to him, but they did seem a little underdressed for battle. These unusual looking warriors broke into a run then and with a blood curdling yell, and although they looked fierce enough they carried only a black iron hammer.

“How primitive; how quaint!” The general shook his head and grinned, now prepared for absolutely anything, or so he thought.

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“Who on this green earth are *they* my lord?” Meyrug asked him from Cadwy’s right hand in astonishment, pointing and with his eyes huge. Several hundred, very strangely attired and equipped men had trotted forward from behind the ranks of Bregantau spearmen, to proudly assemble in front of their host to huge applause and wild cheering. These sparsely attired men bowed deeply and formally to their combrogi before hurrying off to assemble in a loose formation at the western treeline.

“Lug’s arse!” Cadwy cursed under his breath, recognising the shorts and the tooled leather aprons from his history lessons.

“They can’t be!” Meyrug answered him blithely and with a smirk.

Cadwy turned on him quickly in the saddle, with an arched eyebrow and a surprised look.

“You’ve been spending far too much time in the company of my esteemed but incapacitated and very *rude* pencampwr Meyrug ap Prys!” Cadwy scolded him with a grin. “Those esteemed, *gentlemen* warriors Meyrug are the *Corion Aer Gofannon* no less, from the Coritanau in Breged!” He confirmed with more than a touch of awe on his bandaged face, looking back at those holy warriors now with his eyes glittering. “The legendary ‘Flaming Crowns of Gofannon Meyrug’!” He said in wonder. “They are an ancient and sacred order from long ago, last seen in the time of the long slaughter. You do know when that was?” Cadwy arched his eyebrow again at his understudy champion, who nodded wordlessly in response, blushing somewhat now at his earlier outburst. These two combrogi and the rest of the Albion nobility looked on in wonder as these all-volunteer male warriors from Coritana in southeastern Breged formed up and proudly donned their infamous crowns, which amounted to no more than plain wrought iron bands. They sported long leather shorts over stout forge boots and cropped, highly stylised leather aprons, all deeply embossed

with their runes and spiral decorations. This unusual dress was to signify their dedication to the Smith-God, and each was a well-muscled, powerful looking warrior who was clearly no stranger to the anvil. As they jogged past the mounted gŵyrd of Albion proudly and with a measured but athletic step, each big man glistened in the sunlight, looking strangely wet from head to foot. These legendary men were armed with just a long handled and spiked forge hammer of a dimpled black iron, with which they were deadly efficient. They also carried an ancient and equally black flint knife in their left hands, reflecting the staggering age of their order. *Corion Aer Gofannon* was a sacred order that had faded into myth and legend over the centuries but was now honourably recalled by the druid council specifically to meet this new Roman threat. Doused in a stinking, brownish jelly of an ancient alchemist's concoction, they too were death sworn this day, as were the *Chwaeroliaeth Wyllt* who had already made their ultimate and revered sacrifice this day of days. The 'Flaming Crowns of Gofannon' came hard on the heels of that departed sisterhood and the Galedonian wardogs, and they were all seasoned, professional men who had already procreated and consolidated their family lines. These proud and God-dedicated warriors of Coritana now trotted off to their last battle, and with the clamorous cheering of their combrogi sustaining and fortifying them, they looped around this forest's fringe to approach the Romans from the west. They rushed to battle now as the dogs were being slaughtered in their diversionary service, and as they neared the left flank of the enemy lines at full tilt, they chanted the song of the revered swordsmith Arglwydd Gofannon and at the furious tempo of his Godly forge hammers and their own flying feet. Singing at the tops of their voices, the *Corion Aer* had drawn within twenty yards of the hastily reforming Roman lines when they earned their glorious name. These muscular, sprinting and singing warriors struck their ancient flint blades against the iron head of the hammers they carried, close to the soaked leather apron over their hearts. This created a vivid spark, and the rank brown sludge they were smeared in revealed its terrifying power in that instant. These courageous, leather-aproned warriors ignited themselves

with a loud series of *whooshes*, exploding into violent flames from head to foot as they charged in, attacking as living human torches. The Corion screamed at the top of their voices the name of the great God Smith 'Gofannon!' as they smashed into their startled enemy, each knowing that the longer they lived and the more enemies they slew this historic day, the greater their everlasting glory would be. One legendary warrior of the ancient Corion was called Morthwyl, and his song was still sung by Coritana's bards, who over five centuries earlier had managed to kill more than thirty warriors and had lived as a fighting, burning torch all that morning. Some of Morthwyl's descendants called his name at the point of ignition here today rather than Gofannon, and they fought the wildest. The terrified Romans reeled from these living, screaming torches who scorched, smashed and spiked many of them to death before collapsing into sizzling and smoking heaps on the ground. As their final act in this world, some were able to envelop one or more of their enemy in a blazing hug of death before they succumbed, and huge spaces were suddenly cleared around these terrifying, spiritually inspired attackers.

As the Romans' left flank scattered from this shocking and fiery onslaught, the main force of the pendragon's Brythonic host had swept from the trees to the left of the central hill to form ahead, and they were now marching steadily toward them. Those grisly stalwarts had clearly stepped on apace, and the gap between these two great forces shortened inexorably as they marched toward the Romans without pause now, gratified no doubt by seeing their nearest and rearmost flanks in complete disarray. Those moving ranks were now punctuated by gaps around smouldering heaps on the scorched earth as they attempted to march past, each surrounded by the dead and scorched bodies of their own men, and the dismayed troops at the rear had to step around those harrowing and still sizzling remains. Dozens of billowing spirals of black and greasy, *votive* smoke lifted into the grey sky behind those ranks of great Roman formations marching from the Brythons right to left, and it made a shocking scene. A twin phalanx of chariots began to wheel outward from their hidden location in the trees, clattering toward the Romans at the

front to another blare of a horn, and their centurions could be heard competing lustily with their optios in the shouting to reform. Over and above all the dozens of different shaped and coloured banners in the Brythonic host approaching the Romans obliquely and so that they could bring them to battle in this huge inner arena, one huge and un-missable pennant billowed at its centre. It was the terrifying red dragon banner of Pendragon Cadallan which dominated all others, and within its deep and moving folds lurked the most awesome beast. Some would argue that it was the symbol of Prydein herself this historic day, but it was a winged and armour-plated monster brought back to life from a blood-soaked nightmare long ago, and all these incensed Brythons were proud and eager to march under its dread vision. The Romans realised that their elongated left flank would be in contact with their enemy before they all made the sweep around this perimeter to the north-eastern sector around that fortress and to where the exit from this huge peninsula territory lay, and their route to the Tamesa, and so, to a blare from a buccinator followed by several centurions' whistles, these Romans came to a crunching halt and quickly turned to their left to receive the quickly advancing Brythons. The eventual crash of the shield walls was thunderous. The sweating, the heaving and the churning chaos of Camulo's mincer began to this deafening, stuttering clap of sound, and soldiers began to die on both sides.

The new shorter swords which Caswallawn had commissioned were put to good use again alongside the new techniques they had practised, which included being tasked to attack on a given signal, and these Brythons poured into the Roman gelyn with wild shrieks. This infamous king of the Southern Brythons was drawing on a very old *game of bones* ploy learned on his legendary father's knee as a child, and Caswallawn had trained these men and women in its duplicitous but incisive requirements throughout the winter months. This signal would initiate the blowing of identical Roman sounding whistles, confusing the enemy ranks and breaking the rhythm of their soldiers with these false calls, at which point Caswallawn's bold and incisive *bones* gambit would swing into action. A

cornwr played this pre-determined signal from somewhere behind them, and the gŵyrd waited for the next set of Roman rotations at the furious, heaving shield wall and this long and undulating, shifting point of contact where men fought, sweated and died. It was just a few minutes later when the furious and embattled centurions blew their whistles, and the front Roman ranks peeled away into their alleys as instructed and expected by these Brythons, and fresh Roman troops stepped forward to take their places. The centurions were heard to blow their whistles again then, to their own obvious confusion. This caused the disruption that Caswallawn and the Brythons had worked towards, and the Romans who were so practised at following the order of the whistles without thought, were glad to rotate again away from the slashing madness of the front line and before their retreating comrades had time to clear the rear. The gŵyrd then blew their Roman sounding whistles again and the Roman's reacted as trained, even though the next man was not even up to the line, and chaos ensued; the uniquely confusing, *Brythonic* kind of chaos so loved by these enraged tribesmen. Especially tasked and trained warriors with extra armour and a man to either side rushed the head of each lane at the sound of these faugh Roman whistles, and just as the rotating men all along the front line departed. The lead men of these Brythonic *scalpel* teams then charged down these tunnels, attacking the departing men at their backs as their compatriots attacked the men to either side, to open their gap and to allow their supporters pressed in hard behind them to confirm it. The newly rotating Roman soldiers emerging at the front were also surprised and engaged before they were ready, fighting furiously just to confirm their footing. In support of all this long-planned practice and trickery, Caswallawn's new and beautiful, blueish swords with the curving, tear shaped form of the Trojan blades of old took an immediate effect, and of course this surprising set of manoeuvres had been made with the superb timing of Beli Mawr himself at the game board. The well-trained, professional formations of the Roman front ranks then started to break down. As the centurions whistled furiously to demand their men's obedience, the Brythons whistled just as furiously to promote their

disobedience, adding admirably to the chaos all around them. The gŵyrd blew their own identically sounding whistles again and again, adding to this frantic, panicky confusion of the Romans, and Caswallawn's new swords were baptised with their blood amid this roaring and whistling bedlam. The spears and the claws in the sweeping chariots at the flanks began to claim more Roman lives, and it seemed as though the divine chaos of Camulo would reign on Fro Caint. By those who could understand Latin, the Wolf of Rome himself was heard to roar over the din; 'Verbal commands only!' but it was already too late. As these once precise formations buckled, fractured in the overwhelming confusion and then began to break apart, the pendulum of fate swung heavily in favour of Camulo as he dealt Jupiter a fine and bloody nose in the corresponding uproar in the heavens above. The Romans were far from defeated however, and to hastily issued orders they began to shear away from the enemy once finally clear of the hedgerow, beginning with the singed and smoking left flanks which had been their rear guard. Their soldiers moved backwards quickly and in step as their comrades marched on, and they peeled away from their opposing enemy ranks, disengaging in a well-rehearsed rotating manoeuvre. They left their abandoned enemies hanging with indecision as they backed away, leaving too several hundred smouldering heaps on the ground. Impeccably, this Roman army wheeled to the southeast, reforming as it rolled around the Brythons' front left corner in stunning precision, hurling javelin into the sides of their surprised enemy. These garrulous Romans were demonstrating their professionalism and their assiduously practiced marching skills, but more perhaps of their general's iron will and his ferocious determination to win at any cost.

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Two long hours of battle ensued as they moved ever eastwards, crawling at the pace dictated by defensive movement across this huge and divided bowl of land and toward the coast. He was heading stubbornly for the broad swath of ground behind this great fortress ahead and to the left of

him, situated at the far northeastern corner of this broad and uneven plain. Once in the open, Prittanic chariots were charging around them continually in a vast circle and picking off their men with spears. Heavy casualties were sustained by both parties in close combat, but mostly by Caesar's troops at distance as their pilii had been virtually exhausted. However, the Prittans seemed to have an endless supply of their slim, smooth spears, and again, Caesar cursed his lack of cavalry. There seemed to be no end to the number of Prittanic horsemen and charioteers arrayed against him, but he and his men battled onwards, Caesar stubbornly and absolutely refusing to accept failure. Moving his army a quarter turn to the right and to skirt a long hedgerow of blackthorn which screened the slope to the cliffs, Caesar cleverly closed the gap around his right flank and curtailed the encirclement by those maddening chariots. His army moved ponderously onwards down toward the southeast corner of this vale where the ground dipped, using the hedgerow to cover one flank but losing soldiers steadily. They marched ever onwards, turning left and north at a bend in this dense blackthorn hedging, hugging it still to protect their right flank, and heading uphill for the wide gap to the right of that hillfort now ahead of them. He was forced to wheel his men into the centre of this grassy thoroughway however, as accurate archers had appeared from the eastern fringes at the furthest boundary of the adjacent field, pushing them into the centre, and the Romans had to veer away and out of their bowshot, marching closer to Karr Kant to escape these deadly darts falling almost perpendicular out of the sky among them. As Caesar led them through the centre of this broad gap and past the fortress, it gave him and his men some very welcome cover to their western, left flanks as they forged up alongside it. Most of the enraged Prittans had surged around the other side of this hilltop fortress, to flank them and to cut them off, leaving just a few hundred individuals giving chase up this broad avenue. This sensation of protection was soon shattered, as hundreds of archers then appeared on the palisaded battlements of the fortress above them and began raining arrows down on their heads. Others slung rocks at them, and they all had to shelter under

their raised scutum, losing men constantly. Caesar was pushing them onwards relentlessly and without pause, as defensive immobility was impossible when so completely outnumbered. The Romans forged northwards now alongside this fort, heading slightly uphill for the broad passage at the northeastern corner of this grassy plain. Caesar's army in *testudo* must have looked like a herd of vast, shelled beasts crawling along the ground from those deadly battlements, but in this way they could continue until they were out of range of the archers on the palisades. Should they make the wide break in the hedgerow ahead, Caesar had been assured that the road beyond led to the peninsula of land he sought so desperately this day, and so they battled onwards.

A low and mournful sound was heard ahead, and the general's gaze was drawn to this wide gap in the distance and the passage he was heading so stubbornly for. His heart sank to his boots as the tops of several tall and strange looking bronze horns could just be seen emerging, waving in the distance and appearing over the top of that hill beyond it. In the next few moments, huge metal animal heads with streaming pennants and red and gaping mouths above their long, swanlike necks appeared over the brow of that low hill and before the distant treeline behind it. A vast horde of approaching warriors began to materialise under these tall, animalistic horns, and their depressing lowing confirmed Caesar's undoing. An extravagantly attired Prittanic king had appeared directly ahead of him and with an army arrayed around him, and this all too familiar figure and his host had filled the wide space in the dense hedgerow ahead; Caesar's exit from this murderous plain. Mounted on a stunning black stallion and backed by uncountable ranks of allied Prittanic spearmen was the man who had once stood before him in Gaul as one Lord Androgeus. That arrogant and insulting emissary had obviously taken a different path in life as he was now the new King Avarway of Trinovanta and clearly a mortal enemy. He blocked his passage north from this punishing headland and onto the Dortbruff peninsula, effectively corralling him and his men here on deadly Vroe Kantion. This dreaded sight robbed Caesar of his planned future, his escape, his boltholes and his last remaining chance at some

kind of success. The appearance of this newly crowned king incensed him and informed him in no uncertain way that the promises of that man's vassal traitors had been unfounded and false, and he cursed now, wishing he had killed the arrogant barbarian in Bononia when he had the opportunity. Two heads were mounted on the cross-pole of the huge, swirling and triple-lobed banner held high above that host, and Caesar did not need to see the decomposing faces of those decapitated heads to know who they were. It was now obvious that northern Trinovanta no longer offered him any form of sanctuary. An enormous roar erupted from the coastland to their right, and a massive army appeared up the hill from the coast, advancing toward their front right flank as they entered the adjacent maes, and their own huge and billowing central banner bore the wicked and predatory face of a mountain lynx. This big, pale-green flag was surrounded by many other stylised creatures and symbols, and at last it seems the *Southern* Prittans had come to the fight. These troops' dress was somehow a little finer and their kit a little newer than the rest, and they carried superb, long and oval shields of sheet bronze. Their soldiery clasped round shields emblazoned with their various symbols, and they were garrulous on arrival. This huge army crested the hill in the big field to the Romans' right flank and their warcry cleaved the sky apart. The game was finally up, and his bag of options became virtually empty, and so Caesar was brought face to face with his own rash and reckless folly. The bile of his rage rose to burn his insides as his invasion lay in tatters around him, and he found it hard to accept never mind believe that these fur clad heathens had tactically outsmarted him, it was just preposterous, but yet the evidence lay all around him now of just that. Following a frantic mounted council with his officers, it was clear the majority of the Prittans had surged north around the western flanks of this great fortress to try and cut them off, so orders were given to about face and to head back to the ships and their one and only remaining option; escape. Although martyrdom had never been an option, this filled many Roman faces with surprise, as for the first time General Gaius Julius Caesar's name would be linked with failure and defeat. Nevertheless, almost three

and a half thousand surviving Romans performed an immaculate about turn on this foreign grass and began their long and tortuous journey home, as their options had dwindled to nothing and they simply had no alternative. With their right flank now braving another withering onslaught of missiles from the stronghold's battlements on that hill and with arrows peppering their left flank from the distant trees, these Romans left over fifteen hundreds of their comrades either dead or dying on this field in Kantion as they fled.

Under their huge and startling red dragon banner, the main body of Prittanic warriors had indeed moved north around the other side of the Karr, to cut them off and to support Trinovanta in their advance. Now the Romans had about faced however, the enemy had been wrongfooted, and Caesar and his beleaguered troops were surprisingly blessed with a large and fairly clear area to fall back into. The few dozen stragglers who had been trailing them chose not to oppose them at this stunning about face and they scattered to the trees, or they ran away around the fort to join their comrades and to inform them of this startling manoeuvre by their enemy. Strictly organised and in tight defensive formations, Caesar and his remaining army marched back across the plain of Kantion, heading back toward the coast and their only hope of escape. The enemy could not hope to match their faultless formation marching, and so they had gained a small but distinct advantage. As soon as it became clear to the Prittans what the Romans had achieved, those barbarian tribesmen stalled into one milling multitude at the northeastern corner of this plain, whilst the warriors of Trinovanta continued their advance through the hedgerow. As one great force attempted a risible interpretation of Rome's immaculate about turn, the other tried to wheel around it in their pursuit, and it ended once more in the uniquely *Prittanic* kind of chaos which follows these people everywhere they go. Their leaders were clearly screaming for them to sort it out in competing dialects, and it took long minutes for these two amalgamated, swirling forces to reorganise and to continue their pursuit. In these vital minutes, Caesar and his men had drawn a few hundred steps away already and were already out of bowshot

of the fort. A reduced but growing number of enemy troops were now in close pursuit, and Caesar knew it would be a close-run thing before they grew enough in number, overtook him and closed the trap. Tactically however he knew he had literally stolen a march on his disorganised enemy, and these hedgerows should now act to his advantage, as if this vale had been the completely open ground he had envisaged, Prittanic chariots could have easily swept ahead to stall or prevent his escape from this murderous headland.

As they fast marched up a shallow rise and through an enormous gap in the last of these blackthorn bastions, back toward the stream they had crossed only hours previously and still stepping over fallen comrades, they suddenly came to face an enemy they had not yet encountered, holding the crown of this hill ahead and blocking their path. This great tribe arrayed before Caesar now were unusual, looking regal and superior somehow to his trained eye, and his spirits and hopes took a dip. Their main battle banner was an enormous black flag, spangled with silver stars and displaying a flaming war hammer at its heart above a golden crown and these above some strange and white, three-pronged symbol. Two long and pristine, flowing pennants of white flanked this enormous black banner with a sinuous, fire breathing red dragon emblazoned upon each. Their kings were magnificent, especially the enormous man in the middle who incredibly was mounted on a unicorn. A golden crest shone from the crown of his fabulous helmet, and a large, flaming war hammer adorned his long and utterly black shield. The mounted lords of this huge man's vanguard were similarly dressed in black over polished mail, and all were carrying long, oval black shields with matching silver *war-hammer* armorials. In stark contrast to their lords, the glimmering army of burly soldiers standing behind and around them in ordered ranks all wore crimson and black chequered cloaks and trews. To a man, they wore red dragon tattoos on their thick arms and sported voluminous, drooping moustaches of enormous proportion which did nothing to hide the murderous grins on their faces. These were stout and dark-haired men with even darker, glittering eyes, and Caesar knew these to be killing

men. They were very obviously seasoned and highly experienced warriors who faced him now, and they stood immovable behind their black and silver lords and their round, red dragon shields, and they were bristling with tall, razor-sharp spears. More worryingly, they all seemed absolutely delighted to see him.

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Cadwy and his cyfail had followed the moving and rolling battle closely from a nearby hilltop, relieved of frontline duty and tasked with sending for the correct reserves if necessary. He had managed to position himself and his men correctly just in time to see the inspirational but heartrending fire attack of the *Corion Aer Gofannon*. They had witnessed too the enormous crash of the meeting armies' shield walls below which had then followed. Watching Rome's glittering formations from the crown of this hill, battling away at their combrogi below and their seemingly inexorable march toward the Linn Tafwys, these Brythons were buoyed by the sight of their enemy losing men constantly to the screaming multitude surrounding them. They had cheered at the panicked breakdown of the Roman shield wall below them and to the distant but shrill sound of counterfeit whistles. Their cheering endured as those Roman trespassers fought the pendragon's army and then succumbed to Caswallawn's blue swords and his legendary father's well-known *bones* play, which all Prydein was discussing and betting on this day. The enemy had been forced to wheel around CaerCaint from this onslaught but had still marched stubbornly onward for the coast always remaining in their precise formations, and Cadwy could not help but be impressed. From the crown of this hill, they had all heard the lowing of Afarwy's prophetic horns, and finally, these reserved Brythons witnessed the subsequent and breathtaking 'about turn' and the hasty retreat of those Romans behind CaerCant and across Fro Caint. The handful of senior observers around him had been as impressed as Cadwy with the Romans' swift obedience and their thoroughly practiced martial brilliance, and all had joined him soon after in groaning at their countrymen's shambolic attempt at the

same. The Brythonic tribes below soon sorted themselves out somewhat and had shadowed the Romans' progress relentlessly, a few even drawing alongside their flanks as they fled the field. However, due to the enemy's immaculate fast marching, none were able to draw ahead of them and to stop their retreat. Unseen by those swiftly withdrawing enemy but noted by these privileged few on this high ground, the Khumric lords, their champions and their soldiers had been able to approach the battle from the western fringes and with a timing of their own choosing. They had advanced unseen from the west to command the high ground with the sun behind them, stalling the Roman retreat and finally springing their bold trap. The whole nation was aware of Pencampwr Prydeinig Nynniaw's claim to the *rhan y rhyswr* and his rightful claim to *sarhaed* against Caesar himself. Many champions make boastful claims, but this was the sword champion of all Prydein and an issue of the greatest swordsman ever to stalk this earth, and so that great man was determined to claim what was his inalienable right to claim; 'the champion's portion'. The sons of Beli Mawr always achieved what they set out to achieve, and evidence of their audacious and breathtaking enterprise played out on that hilltop below Cadwy and his men now. He had drawn his cyfail up this small hill to the north, barely a hundred reeds away from the western passage and so they could watch anxiously as the Khumry and the legendary sons of Beli Mawr joined the fray, as now, absolutely anything could happen.

With a devastating downhill, v-shaped charge and led by a ferocious legend on what looked like a unicorn, the glorious Khumry split the Roman ranks. A loud clashing of steel arrived on the breeze which had erupted from those battling front ranks, and within a few brief minutes and with great determination, those magnificent Khumric lords had effectively corralled Caesar and his officers. They were clearly attempting to allow the legendary King Nynniaw to rightly demand his champion's portion and to prosecute his *sarhaed*, and all these excited witnesses were breathless in anticipation. Bright steel flashed far swifter than the eye could follow from this distance, and the audacious lords of the mother country penetrated those gelyn's ranks in fury so that Nynniaw could take the

fight to Caesar himself. Cadwy and all these people around him watched truly entranced by what was unfolding below them on the grass of Fro Cention, as those splendid Khumric lords, their champions and their soldiers were pouring into the Roman ranks now with an unsurpassed élan. Their sacred, glittering blades flashed with the utmost speed and accuracy, and many outclassed Roman soldiers were cut to ribbons before they even knew what had hit them. Black capes over dazzling mail and a following swarm of red chequered mantles seemed to explode into the Roman ranks on that hillside, and none could stand. They watched entranced as King Nynniaw ap Beli Mawr thrashed a space around himself with his glorious glittering and most famous bar of steel, which all here knew without seeing was deeply engraved with its infamous, animalistic forms. It was known throughout Prydain as *Weiryn-y-ddraig*, and as Nynniaw's 'Dragon-blade' flashed like silver lightning below, Cadwy held his breath as did everyone around him.

As Nynniaw approached the obvious knot of protective warriors around their general, the experienced looking ranks of guards closest to Caesar fought like demons in his protection, especially a tall and aristocratic looking officer who barred the way. The enraged Nynniaw would not be deflected, nor would he be denied his claim, and so he dropped this officer like a sack of dead rabbits at his feet with a savage blow to his shoulder with the legendary *Weiryn-y-ddraig*. This gravely wounded noble was identified as one Labienus by the cries of alarm and the calls for his rescue from the Romans, who managed to drag this man away with his shoulder streaming blood and his toga splashed heavily with the same. Supported by Lludd, Afalach and Nynniaw's enraged son Gwerdded, the *red dragons* of Prydain attacked the general's personal guard, and they were simply unstoppable. In moments, there in front of this infuriated Brythonic king and the champion of all Prydain stood the Roman general himself.

"Khumry am byth! Prydain am byth!" Nynniaw roared his battlecry, and he attacked Caesar in the next heartbeat.

The Romans surged to protect their general, but Nynniaw's family had responded to his shout, and they battled their way around him, dropping Romans like skittles to protect him and to isolate the two, allowing this sacred bout of mortal combat they demanded so furiously. Lludd, Afalach and Gwerdded slaughtered Romans left and right with an insurmountable ferocity as did their relentless champions, forcing back these Romans, and abruptly there were two men fighting in a clearing.

Hundreds of stocky warriors, all bearing red dragons on their shields and on their muscular arms flooded three sides of this ground, clearing an area around the two combatants and holding back Brythonic and Roman soldiers alike. The Essyllwyr threw up this spontaneous, shifting arena so that the finest swordsman in the land and the chosen red dragon of Prydain could claim his champion's portion and address the Roman dog in single mortal combat. Nynniaw attacked Caesar again with an electric suddenness and with an enraged overhead cut, but Caesar somehow parried it, stepping away quickly. The two men began to circle each other, and the air around them was suddenly filled with the roaring and cheering of both camps as all hostilities had been wordlessly suspended. Both these experienced military men were steeped in a lifetime of training and army tradition, and the fight was instantly a highly technical but brutal bout as they lunged and hacked at each other with accurate and murderous intent. Blocking and parrying with the reactions of serpents, each looked for the slightest chink in the other's defences, and the baying of the madly jostling crowd around them grew wild. The deep and solid ranks of the Essyllwr who had almost encircled this fight, locked shields and held back this baying, mindless crowd, and they forestalled too the further swarm of Brythons heading uphill toward the already vast mob around this fight. The inebriated warriors charging up this grassy hill were all lost to the killing madness and so had to be controlled by the *red-dragon* warriors of the motherland, but this caused a beaverlike dam of clamorous warriors across the western uplands of Fro Caint. They were all screaming blue faced murder and shoving forwards like lunatics, as more warriors flowed across Fro Caint to thicken their rear ranks at the foot of

this hill. However bright their alcohol fuelled ardour burned it fell well short of suicide, and none would brave the levelled spears of the indomitable and immovable Essyllwyr, as their sharp edges had no concept of race nor creed.

“Khumry am byth! Prydein am byth!” Nynniaw roared again within this manic, almost uncontrollable circle of yelling and elbowing warriors. Prydein’s pencampwr and sword-master began to dominate the Roman general then and with a furious assault, *Weiryn-y-ddraig* a shimmering blur. Caesar blocked and parried for his life, his head flicking from side-to-side to dodge the long, flashing steel, and he retreated steadily from the ferocity of this huge warrior, his eyes wide. He flashed his shorter gladius at Nynniaw’s eyes when he was able but had failed to make even a fleeting contact as there was not a scrap of exposed skin anywhere on this king, and his dazzling accoutrements were of the very highest order. They clashed again then, the edges of their hugely unmatched swords biting at each other as the two men heaved and twisted for advantage, but Nynniaw was bigger and much stronger. As Caesar was forced backwards by the sheer brute strength of this big and powerful man, his eyes sharpened, and he suddenly spat in Nynniaw’s face. The Roman ejected a big mouthful of phlegm right into Nynniaw’s eyes, and before he could respond, dealt him an enormous blow to his head with his gladius and while he was still blinded by his spittle. Nynniaw reeled from this savage strike, which he had mercifully partly parried blindly and by instinct with his shield. Nevertheless, the broad and heavy tip of Caesar’s gladius had cracked him hard on his helm, and he staggered backwards from the blow. The roaring outrage of Brythonic voices around him faded as little lights danced in Nynniaw’s eyes and blood ran down his right cheek, his mind reeling. As his concentration had been so effectively broken by the Roman’s scurrilous act and being stunned by the following strike to his head, his sword had dipped alarmingly to touch the ground. Caesar saw his opportunity and stepped forward in a flash to boldly stamp on Nynniaw’s blade before jumping quickly back again, and although the king managed to keep hold of the grip, his sacred sword was bent and

ruined. Stunned still but enraged at the base and honourless distraction perpetrated by Caesar, and now the desecration of his revered blade, Nynniaw fought both his disgust of this man and the whirling confusion in his damaged head. He tried to take another step backwards whilst trying to wipe the filth from his eyes and to the howling rage of his surrounding men, but somehow he was pinned. Reeling still from the blow and the huge split dent in his helmet, Nynniaw realised from the insistent tugging on his left arm as he tried to cuff the blood and slime from his eyes that Caesar's gladius was still stuck fast to the rim of his shield. The Roman was still hanging onto the grip of his sword, trying to pull the blade free, and Nynniaw struggled to keep hold of his shield. As he recovered his senses a little and took this all in, Nynniaw's face darkened with fury, and this big Khumric sovereign roared again, wrenching the shield away from Caesar and his blade with it. Nynniaw swept his slightly bent long sword around to decapitate the Roman, but the rogue was a nimble dog and escaped.

Caesar ducked under the misshapen blade easily, but his eyes had flown open in alarm at the loss of his own priceless gladius. Then he moved like a snake, flashing a dagger from his left hand, but this barbarian king had spotted the flicker of movement and just managed to parry it with his ruined sword before stepping aside. Caesar withdrew quickly, searching the ground frantically around him for another gladius or a javelin; anything, but all he saw were splintered foreign spears and broken shields.

Nynniaw had recovered from the blow to his head, and he wiped more of the Roman's foul scum from his eyes and more blood, which dribbled down from the split steel nestled in the great V-shaped dent in his helmet. He lowered his broken shield then, with pale splinters delineating the ragged rent in the black painted lime wood and his sundered *war-hammer* cygil. Keeping one eye on the Roman dog and scowling with a hate filled disgust, he pinned the long oval shield to the ground with a big warboot and levered Caesar's gladius from the steel grip of the cleaved rim. More

red, royal blood flowed down his face and dripped onto his boot as he did this, and the mindless sound of this crowd seemed to swell and fade now in his ears in soft pulses. Once he had wrenched the foreign sword free with its bejewelled pommel and its polished ivory grip, Nynniaw roared again savagely, brandishing the somewhat yellowed enemy blade high. His Brythonic warriors were overjoyed, and their cheering became deafening once more within this raw and shifting, roaring enclosure of sweaty human flesh. Twenty feet away, Caesar's eyes grew wide and fearful however as he eyed his own blade with an obvious dread, and he looked around himself for escape now, the raucous bellowing of this partisan crowd adding to his obvious fear. Nynniaw felt a cold shiver snake up his spine at that moment and his scalp start to tingle, but he put these meaningless irritations from his mind and looked up to see the Roman dog backing away, looking around for another blade. As his heart began to gallop in a strange and unwelcome rhythm, Nynniaw shook his head to try and clear a vague but encroaching befuddlement. Scattering diamonds and rubies of sweat and blood from his head and his dented helmet, he approached Caesar again with his dragon-like warface glowering death and the dog's own gladius in hand.

"Your death approaches you beardless, honourless cur!" Nynniaw roared at him in an acceptable Latin, brandishing this priceless gladius at the foreign invader. The Roman took one look at his captured blade in Nynniaw's outstretched fist, and he turned on his heel and fled to the Roman quarter of this improvised arena. The mutual armistice ended in that same flash of time, but the professional Romans moved first, exploding into action at this pivotal moment in support of their general, and they surged forward to encircle him. A basic sword was thrust into his hands and Caesar held it aloft behind his quickly reforming front ranks, screaming his abuse and his rage at the Brythons as his men closed in around him again. Nynniaw, now possessed by the terrifying rage of Camulo set about these front-rank soldiers and he scattered them whilst calling out Caesar's name and shaming him with the most emasculating ridicule for dishonouring a sacred bout of mortal combat and for fleeing

the field like a 'milkmaid'. He cut Romans left and right with this fabulous foreign sword, and he drew on every curse word of Latin he had learned since he was whelped. Whilst his insults and challenges may have been crudely conveyed, their meaning and conviction were clear to all who heard his roaring over the din of resumed battle. The great Roman general however was definitely not forthcoming, and unseen to the Brythons, his rear ranks had been furious with axes to open up a wide gap in the blackthorn bastion behind them. The Romans had locked their long shields tight around him again and began to push through this ragged but wide rent in the hedgerow behind them, to reform on the other side and to begin marching toward the coast once more, grinding their way back uphill behind this ferociously prickly hedge. In this fifty-meter gap behind the hedgerow and before the jagged clifftop, they quickly swung west up this hill and in their precise and narrowed formations, before then forging through another swiftly hacked down gap in the hedgerow further along. The now disgraced bout of single combat had drawn the Brythonic host into a huge crowd which had choked the broad approach to that broad hillside, held back by the Essyllwyr. With impeccable timing and the most impressive form, the fleeing Romans were able to force their way over and around in tight formation, to sweep past the Khumry and a confused Brythonic multitude behind this perimeter hedgerow, and before breaking back through onto the grassy hillside and charging down the other side of it as they reformed and fell into position. The Romans progressed smoothly from the 'fast step' into 'full pace' once in formation, and they accelerated away quite noticeably, in full retreat now. The ground they vacated was littered with many of their fallen soldiers, the living and the soon dead, but to pause now would mean certain death for all and so they marched on. Their martial excellence had gained them this invaluable reprieve and they were not about to throw it away. In a tight phalanx they had encircled their general, and their swiftly moving blocks bristled with weapons now behind the rows of interlocked scutum, and they charged up this field, back toward the stream with a newfound energy.

Nynniaw's rage exploded at this cowardice, and he along with all these Khumric lords pursued and attacked the Romans again at their rear, and a loose company of troops who had remained at the rear by choice who were bravely but suicidally attempting to gain their general some valuable time. Nynniaw vanquished almost a dozen of these brave soldiers and two of their officers before he tired suddenly and staggered away, bending at the waist with his hands on his knees and vomiting to the grass. The main Roman force continued to quickly withdraw from the field in their practised way, fighting continually as they quick marched in step up the second hill from this battlefield and the one leading back onto the great promontory, but they were almost running now. Lludd Llaw Ereint who commanded this host, roared in triumph as he watched Caesar's panicked departure with his fleeing officers scurrying around him like handmaidens. His troops were drawn tight around him in a protective formation as they fled, all the time stepping over the bodies of their own comrades who had fallen earlier, and it made a memorable sight. Nynniaw had ominously fallen ill however, and Lludd was deeply concerned at this worrying development as was everyone around him. The king had suffered a superficial head wound but had fought on without pause or impediment for some time before needing to be carried from the field, semi-conscious and mumbling dark curses.

"Khumry am byth! Prydein am byth!" Lludd bellowed after Caesar in his booming voice of power, mirroring his brother's warcry. His face flushed, as he feared that scurrilous Roman may have committed the foulest crime of all here today. "Come back and we'll skin you alive you beardless, treacherous dog!" He yelled in Latin at that fast-retreating enemy equally loudly, his fury animating the blazing blue eyes in his hard features. Lludd's family surrounded him then, and the Khumry screamed their victory at the retreating wolf of Rome and his scuttling army of defeated soldiers. The Khumry were above chasing cowards, but the onrush of allied, screaming and uncountable southern Brythonic warriors swept past and around them in pursuit of those Romans, and it became a rout. It was only the authority of Caesar and his officers, and the superb training of

their soldiers which kept them together and alive as they rushed back to their beachhead picking up fallen weapons as they went. They battled onwards at full pace, following the sun to the west in the hope of reaching their ships before being overrun. To an order from Caesar, some rear cohorts turned and faced the unbelievable, uncoordinated mass of their following enemy. Forming into a precise rectangular block to the rear, they made another sacrificial rear guard, and were tasked with slowing the advance of that chasing and screaming multitude as their comrades marched away behind them.

Cadwy and his men were close now, close to the right flank of this huge crowd of warriors charging mindlessly from Fro Caint to the foot of that sloping hill. Upwards in wild pursuit they swept, hooting and screaming like lunatics, and Cadwy shook his head, seeing many of their forward elements impaled on foreign javelins. They threw themselves onto that expert and detached rear guard in their madness, who were marching carefully backwards shoulder to shoulder, and this hillside became littered with Brythonic dead and injured. The mixed tribes of Brythonic reserves had broken free of their holding area in the forest and were now flowing south from the treeline behind Cadwy yelling and shrieking, and there were thousands of them. News had obviously spread that the Romans were in retreat, and no orders could contain them now as they charged carelessly from their holding area in the nearby trees, adding immeasurably to this madness. Cadwy knew they were too late and would never catch those fleeing Romans, hanging his head as he watched dozens of drunken tribesmen trip and fall over their downed comrades and enemy bodies alike. Slipping and sliding on that muddy and bloody slope of grass, they were making a fine mess for the hospital porters to negotiate the field, but there was nothing anyone could do about that now as they were all lost to the irrational passion of possible killing and head-hunting, boosted no doubt by copious amounts of local alcohol. Cadwy had already put his men under strict orders, and there would be no mindless pursuit from the Albion ranks. He motioned to Hefin and Meyrug, and they turned to see the fabulous banners of Galedon, their glimmering

lords and the infamous *Gŵyrd y Gogledd* leave the field with hundreds of unbloodied and scowling Gadwyr trotting in their wake. Galedon withdrew, as those noble warriors chased no escaping rats either, it was simply beneath them. As Cadwy watched his future *chwegrun* and the valiant host around him leave the field in all their splendour, he struggled to think of the phrase *old enemy* in their regard after all they had achieved together. Sitting upright in his saddle, he and all Albion watched proudly as those northern warriors they had come to know and respect so well return to their camp victorious. They marched away under their *golden-stag, skull, vixen, ram* and *white-stallion* pennants, vanishing into the trees. Then Cadwy turned back, and that is when he saw Sel.

Prince Selwyn ap Dwyfal led a brigade of Enouanta's *penwedi y gath*; the elite ranks of the *Gŵyr Enouant* and alongside his proud and infamously ambitious father. The 'fangs of the cat' engaged the Romans' left flank with a furious attack and from the coastal promontory where they had been waiting, just as the Romans funnelled down the other side of this grassy hill from the river they had just crossed. Cadwy called for his officers, and he ordered them to cut across the thinning rear ranks of this mob, crossing the bottom of this rise and to then wheel right and sweep uphill. He tasked them to reach the furthest flank and to then move uphill in support of his young friend. Few words were needed, and a hundred mounted warriors of Selgofa set out behind Cadwy and a tall, dapper major in a fine woollen tunic with shining silver buttons. They thundered across the remains of these howling warriors at the back of this careering jumble and in tight formation, bowling many combrogi over to the grass, most of them already drunk. This Selgofan party then turned up field, swept over the crown to ride downhill and approach this developing assault from the *Gŵyr Enouant*, and they charged toward it. At the centre of the bold, flanking attack ahead of them, Selwyn was acquitting himself well as they harried the rearmost ranks of the Romans' left flank, volleys of spears and javelin flying both ways. These were Albion men and women fiercely attacking their enemy, so these Selgofan reinforcements joined the fray with animalistic shrieks, loosing their own spears and arrows into

the fleeing Roman ranks. Cadwy was alongside Selwyn and the Gŵyr of Enouanta when their king's horse was suddenly felled at the furious front. It was hit square in the face by a well-aimed slingstone coming from somewhere in the Roman ranks. It dropped King Dwyfal's horse in an instant, spilling this audacious vassal monarch to the ground. Selwyn dismounted quickly as did Cadwy, and in seconds they were side by side, but Cadwy was forced into action instantly, *Lladdwyr-glaer* killing two encroaching Romans effortlessly before they could further attack this sprawling monarch. Hefin and Meyrug moved quickly to his sides, followed by their captains, and although the Romans would have loved to have grabbed a king, made obvious by the gold crown around his helmet and his fabulous armour, they were far more concerned with staying in touch with their rearmost retreating ranks. King Dwyfal was groggy from the hard fall, and Selwyn supported his right arm as Cadwy took the weight of the king's left, and they dragged him backwards, clear of the melee. They got a few reeds away and were heading for the horses, when there was a loud and metallic *thud*, making Dwyfal convulse with a grunt between them. The steel point of a Roman javelin had punched out through the king's backplate, and the bright steel poking through the sable collared cloak protruded about six inches and it was slicked with dark and royal blood.

"Tad!" Selwyn howled in horror as they rushed him to cover.

Meyrug called loudly for hospital porters, but the king was already dead by the time they got him into cover behind the horses and a hurriedly thrown up wall of shields. Sadly, it became clear that King Dwyfal of the Gŵyr Enouant had paid the ultimate price for his vainglory and his infamous ambition, and many grisly old warriors were reduced to tears at the sight. With the clamour of battle receding behind him, Cadwy's heart was breaking as he watched his young friend on his knees, gripping his father's bloody sword hilt and weeping uncontrollably. Fighting back his own tears, Cadwy knelt beside him and put his arm about his shaking shoulders, but Selwyn threw it off, not able to meet his eyes. Cadwy hung

his head, remaining respectfully silent but supportive of his battle brother and one of his closest friends.

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It took four embattled hours to reach the coastline of Kantion and the pebble beach where they had landed these long weeks past, pressed and harried every inch of the way. They fought and they ran for their lives now as all wild Prittania was at their heels, but every man panting and gasping for air had blessed Mars and all his Gods that the fleet footed, red haired and monstrous, blue painted beasts of gleeful slaughter were not among them. Had the *Gadwyre* they feared so much now led the chase, they would have surely been caught and destroyed.

These winded Romans managed to find the head of the small river valley which led down to the now deeply hated pebble beach, and the Romans flowed down it faster than the water it carried. Caesar was immensely relieved to see the remains of his fleet floating in the bay, holding station in a stiffening easterly, and as he and his men charged down onto the pebbles they waved frantically to the sailors for their attention. They lost men to spears and arrows streaking out of the woods and from the ridgeline of death once more every step of the way, and his men were dropping like flies. He and his officers continued to frantically signal his captains to come ashore so that they could embark and escape, and they hurried across these noisy pebbles for the remains of their timber bastion to await the first ships. Roughly fifteen hundred Roman soldiers ground across these detested pebbles, behind their general and down to the still littered shoreline as the first of their huge ships approached the shallows. Their shameful retreat and their hurried withdrawal from this beach was done amid a pelting with strap flung cowpats as well as all manner of missiles, and much ignominious and ribald abuse from the river and the ridgeline. The headlands, the ridgeline and every scrap of land around became filled with thousands of roaring and gesticulating warriors, far more than the day they had arrived. It was only Caesar's standing orders regarding the repaired and powerful artillery pieces on the biggest ships

that allowed them to escape at all, and the scramble nets he had the sailors prepare proved invaluable. The excellent libritor immunes on the bows of the first approaching ships once again kept the beach clear of large enemy formations with their devastating two-pound ordnance, preventing their beachside comrades from being surrounded and slaughtered. Protected in this way, most managed to clamber up these scramble nets to board their ships, but under a constant pelting of cow shit and clouds of murderous arrows, sling stones and bawdy but indecipherable verbal abuse. Some, the unlucky fell with a shriek as so many of their comrades had already done, and tragically now after so much valiant effort, they fell back into this foreign sea or onto these cold and wet pebbles just yards from safety.

As the sun flamed darkly in the late western sky above them, Caesar's sails filled with the sour gusts of failure, and his face was a pale, brittle mask. Nobody dared look at him let alone speak to him as these ships began to head for the channel. The general had spotted one solitary figure on the Kantish headland overlooking his defeated departure, and it had made his blood boil. That tall, regal looking man with his shining brow and the long white robes of a priest had stood an unmoving witness. It had made Caesar spit overboard with frustration, and he had been unapproachable since that deeply humiliating moment. Caesar's one remaining scribe huddled under these much-repaired timbers had scratched the approximate date of their departure into the wax of his last tablet as just short of the Autumn Equinox. What he did not dare record on his tray of wax just yet was the fact that they had just escaped with their lives, and this bedraggled group of twelve patched-up ships were all that remained of Caesar's once proud invasion fleet of eighty. Filled with defeated, thin and hungry survivors, these battered Roman vessels heeled with this petulant wind and retreated into the grey, swelling heart of the channel. General Gaius Julius Caesar was finally forced to face his failures, and now too a stark and a perhaps lamentably short future. He was also forced to acknowledge that his creative and his oratory skills would soon be given the ultimate test; that of life or death itself.

The general remained silent and withdrawn throughout the painful return voyage, as did all the other survivors. He had been forced to flee back to his lair in northern Gaul and to lick his wounds by uncivilised, unpredictable barbarians dressed in skins, and it was almost impossible to accept far less explain to his peers. With the vengeful ire of two powerful politicians and a Roman lynch mob to face at home, an empty treasure chest and an inexcusable butcher's bill of almost nine and a half thousand men to justify, Caesar knew he would have to get highly creative in his post invasion summary.



Chapter Twenty-One.

The brave and ever ambitious, impetuous but late King Dwyfal of the Enouanta had received his grand and royal pyre, surrounded by his *wildcat* royal guard; the elite among the *Gŵyr Enouant* and Dwyfal's most loyal and senior officers. All the aristocracy of Albion were there to pay their respects to that memorable and gregarious king, but none had been too surprised that in the war against Rome, his renowned ambition had finally outpaced his fading ability.

Countless fires had burned their black wreaths into the heavens above Caint as many fine fallen soldiers over the following days were cremated in honour. Their ashes were interred in sombre ceremony or they were buried unburned in a hollowed-out tree, or they were taken home by a comrade, whatever was their tribe's enduring tradition. Dwyfal's ashes were interred in a huge royal burial ceremony, and shortly thereafter his son and heir Prince Selwyn had been raised to kingship, taking the walk against the sun at midnight and claiming the ancient throne of Enouanta to much celebration. Khumry's celebrations were muted however and no victory festivities were held by the sons of Beli Mawr, as Nynniaw's sickness from his head wound had turned into a foul thing of corruption and honourless intent. A livid web of angry red snakes had covered the king's denuded and jaundiced head, all emanating from the smallest cut to his scalp. Caesar's gladius had pierced the steel, leather, felt and the silk of Nynniaw's helmet, just enough to split the skin beneath, and the sickness from its poison had ravaged him. His shrunken, invaded body had shed every hair within days of the battle, and that bri laden king of such immense stature, unmatched lineage and world-wide reputation had been reduced to a shrivelled and ruined thing, lying on the very threshold of death's door. All now knew across this land and abroad that the honourless dog Caesar had used a poisoned blade, as testified by the

Roman survivors of Nynniaw's great rage with the foreign sword. All who were touched by Caesar's bejewelled gladius but survived the battle that day had died, burning up in fever within days. Caesar's name had become *faeces* on the lips of all true Brythons and will be, until the end of days.

Despite all frantic effort from the druidens and the best healers available, it took fifteen terrible wasting days of fevered agony for the great King Nynniaw to succumb to that vile foreign poison. In those terrible days, his once huge and muscular body had melted away to leave just a shrunken, twisted and red veined yellow skeleton on the silk covered bracken. A grieving Prydein and her mother country prepared to send the late High King Beli Mawr and his High Queen Dôn another of their great sons to join them in the Underworld. At the precise moment his ancestor Bel touched the earth to create the most vivid and memorable sunset, with one last agonised and tortuous breath Nynniaw died, and he passed from this world to the next under the blood red and elemental splendour of his glorious predecessor. One more of the legendary 'Red Ravagers of Prydein' crossed the bridge of swords in great honour and ceremony, where Arglwydd Lug Ddu was sure to be waiting for him there with a hero's throne and open arms. King Nynniaw ap Beli Mawr ap Manogan Fawr; the fourth *red dragon* of Prydein, slayer of the Senator and Legate Titus Labienus and the scourge of General Gaius Julius Caesar, as rightly named and remembered had journeyed swiftly to the Underworld in everlasting glory, and the bards were busy with their englyns. That eternal Brythonic legend was burned on the biggest funeral pyre seen since his glorious father had crossed the bridge of swords seven long years previously. His cremated remains were then buried in a huge but grave state ceremony orchestrated by HênDdu himself. It was surrounded by a vast crowd which had come from all corners of Prydein and Gallia to LludsDun and to the Tafwys, their most sacred river to witness this most celebrated yet most solemn historic event.

The air was torn with the wailing of the werrin whilst druids droned, bronze horns bellowed, and elk-skin drums hammered as the sombre

Khumric Gŵyrd of Gorddofica performed their heart-breaking duty. They placed the silver lidded pot containing Nynniaw's ashes in the centre of a plain but heavy gold disc, and which had been laid centrally on the floor of this stone lined chamber to remind all of the great man's lineage back to Bel himself. This huge grave had been excavated close to the great northern gate of LludsDun, and the large and deep cyst had then been expertly lined with immaculate and tightly fitted spruce boards. Then Nynniaw's last resting place had been lovingly filled with all his favourite accoutrements and his beloved weapons. His favourite gold-plated beard comb and blade stone were reverentially hung on these fragrant walls, along with a mirror and the toothpick he used daily. His gem studded honour-dagger and many of his other favourite things joined these fabulous creations, hanging on the spruce boards or placed on the small oak table in the corner, each deposited with a druid's prayer and a chorus of wailing from the werrin. Nynniaw's marvellous Khumric hunting bow and his gold trimmed buckskin quiver were placed in a corner, along with his bear traps and many other much loved and oft-used, beautifully crafted pieces of hunting equipment. His arms and armour were carefully included along with his normal daily appendage; the silver rimmed and lidded auroch horn drinking cup. This will be forever known as *gren a desgy*/ Nynniaw Fawr; the 'drinking pot and lid' of Prydein's lost and much-lamented champion. The wailing of human voices rose as did the cacophony of music around them as a huge, silver headed and engraved ceremonial war hammer was laid below the king's ashes, causing the droning of the priests to rise too. Among the last of these precious grave goods was the repaired and fabulous *Weiryn-y-ddraig*; the sacred long sword bequeathed to Nynniaw by his father with its mystical dragon etchings. It was deliberately placed over the bejewelled, but still poisonous gladius Nynniaw had wrested from Caesar that day, and with which the mortally injured king had slain so many Roman gelyn. The now destroyed and misshapen Roman blade had been named *Angau-melyn* by the Brythons meaning 'yellow-death' and *Crocea-mors* by the Romans with the same meaning, and it had been deliberately twisted and bent

double in an eternal curse before being laid below the fantastic silver pot containing the king's ashes. This was overlaid by his glittering heirloom sword, and *Angau-melyn* would there be forever dominated by Dragonblade until the end of days. Nynniaw's beloved chariot had then been upturned over all this once the great wheels had been removed and put to one side for his use in the Underworld. The capstones in the form of three huge slabs of rock were then dragged over to seal the grave. Hundreds of people had spent the next few days throwing up a huge barrow over this royal grave which lay only thirty miles from his capital CaerGwlyb, and songs were written by the score about the event. The time when the great and fearless Nynniaw; the pencampwr of all Prydein had died the glorious death of *isarno marwol* in defeating the Wolf of Rome. An event which will be remembered forever by the Brythons. The future storytellers of Prydein will come to recall these events with much acidic ridicule, however, as is their way, and their bards will sing with scorn of how Nynniaw ap Beli overcame Caesar's lapdog Labienus as if he were a boy squire caught wielding his master's sword. In the depths of this freezing Yule and in every warm tavern across this great country these songs tell of how Nynniaw had then defeated Caesar, taking his foul sword from him in contempt *'as the yellow dog knew not how to wield it.'* The Pencampwr Prydeinig had then made the Roman general; *'pick up his skirts and run like a frightened maid for the security of the milking parlour, as Nynniaw then slew his Roman cows by the hundred with his own foul and accursed sword.'*

Over the following weeks and leading up to their beloved 'day of the dead' celebrations, Caesar's name became the plaything of these humorous Brythons and their ruthless bards. He became known as the 'yellow dog of Rome,' 'treacherous bastard,' 'child killer' and 'woman slayer' among many other dire curse names and insults. The yellow dog; Caesar always took the clownish and deceitful main character in dozens of musical and comical invectives performed to gales of laughter in every court, great hall and tavern across Prydein, and these song tales will endure for generations to come. The victorious Brythons sang their demeaning and

their scornful songs, they drank their barley beer and their mead, and they retold the glory filled stories of when the sons of Beli Mawr himself went to battle in the defence of Arglwydd Prydein, and that the very foundations of Rome itself had been shaken by the experience. Many Prydeinig werrin were certain that the Romans had learned their lesson and would never be foolish enough to challenge *united* Prydein's might and to come here in arms again. Those with a more worldly knowledge and large networks of spies knew that this Prydeinig unity was ephemeral, and they knew too of the Romans' greed and of their vengeful nature, and so, they had already begun the planning to repel the Romans on their expected return, whenever that would be. The aristocracy and the leading warriors of Prydein were sure that Caesar would return soon, as they knew his infamous ego and his legendary reputation would not and could not stand this defeat. The yellow dog of Rome would be compelled to right this great wrong of his at some point, that is if he survived whatever awaited him in Rome.

It was some weeks later when the soldiers of the northern allied triad finally returned to their homes and home territories, the Gadwyr having travelled by far the greatest distance. Those glorious, unmatched warriors after all they had done completed another eye-watering march of more than eight hundred miles back to their frozen northern outpost, dragging their dead and their injured with them, where they buried the former and tended the balance. They boiled down their trophies, melted their gold and made their offerings to GrutArd in their black and terrifying citadel of DunTarwddu. Incredibly, news had filtered back from Gallia, even reaching high Galedon that General Caesar had somehow convinced his countrymen that his rash, utterly unprepared and wholly defeated, failed invasion of Prydein had been a success in some unfathomable way. He had ludicrously claimed that; 'He had achieved his *customary* success and had secured all that he had come for but had been forced to leave many of his damaged ships and a great mountain of this booty along with hundreds of slaves on a beach due to a large and threatening storm'. It beggared Brythonic belief that the people of Rome had actually swallowed

this nonsense, but by all accounts swallow it they had; completely. Also, to the utter amazement of all who had witnessed his blood-soaked removal from the field on Fro Cantion, it transpired that the Legate Titus Labienus had survived his injury from the sacred Dragon-blade, escaping Prydein with his general to make a full recovery. These things had been confirmed by impeachable sources, so every soul in this country was left to ponder just how fortunate these Romans were, especially *lucky* Labienus. Most could not conceive however how on earth that Roman rogue in a general's uniform had accomplished such a brazen falsehood, and their disbelief was unbound that he could have in any way accounted for such insupportable losses. The news was made more incredulous when it was revealed that the Romans had actually celebrated his homecoming as if he was a returning conqueror. They had held a huge street carnival in his name and even a ceremony they called a *Triumph*, which was absurd when the entire world knew the treacherous dog had been trounced by the allied Brythons and had only just escaped with his life, and with empty pockets. These proud and honest Brythons were forced to conclude that whilst their soldiers were fine men, their politicians and their city dwelling counterparts must be a very dull and gullible lot. The Brythonic lords with the *factual* knowledge however were deeply concerned at this astounding turn of events, for if Caesar's return to Rome was as celebrated and as successful as the news implied, he would be in a far better position to organise a return visit to these shores much sooner than expected, and this time with the power of all Rome behind him? This was the question on their lips, and these same wise noble men and women began to formulate their plans for war once again, as prophetically perhaps Samhain neared and so did the end of this historic year. Prydein's rulers were forced to ponder would it be this swiftly approaching next year; the Roman's 700th annual celebration to the founding of their great capital which would see their return, confirming the uati's prophecy? Or would it be the year following, or the one after that which would witness the return of the yellow dog? This was the critical issue that the Brythonic power players

considered as their relieved werrin prepared for Samhain and to welcome their dead back to this world, especially their most recent.

* * * * *

The black flags and ribbons were festooned everywhere, and the candlelit skulls were in their niches as Casufelawny and the rest of Prydein prepared to celebrate Samhain; the holy festival of the dead. This is always a week-long festival nearing the end of the Brythonic year and which also carefully and accurately observes the beginning of winter. As freezing sleet slashed diagonally across the vast enclosure below, confirming the season and spattering the glistening towers of CaerGwlyb white, Caswallawn was counting his ill-gotten coin within by a roaring fire and with his feet up, carefully formulating his own future. Plans which encompassed the acquisition one way or another of the big bow of fine Dobunny land to his west. As he relaxed in this comfortable chair and sipped a fine warm mead, his inscrutable blue eyes twinkled in the firelight as he also considered his longer-term ideas for Atrebata to the south, and the far more wealthy but powerful houses of the Coritanau to his north.

Ederus had resumed the marble throne of ArdFergus Fawr at snow covered CaerCamelon, relaxing now into his role as monarch of Galedon and impassioned cattle baron. Whilst at the heart of this great country in Breged, Bellnor had resumed the endless argument of allowance and the oft lobbied stewardship of DunRheadr with his eternally ambitious son Cartysman. Cridas had promoted the victorious and astonishing Gŵyr Tŵyr ap Garth, the double centurion slayer to *cadfridog*; 'general' of his elite *Plufyn* Brigades before the ruling king of Albion had then turned to more personal matters. King Cridas once free of his more pressing national commitments had accompanied his now famous and married son Cadwy to assume the office of Head-Sheriff of Western Selgofa, and the king of Albion had stood proud throughout the ancient induction ceremony. Cridas had too proudly borne witness as his son then took possession of his new lands and both caers in the new Albion Baronetcy of

Bidog, adorned beautifully as it was in a crisp and fresh mantle of deep snow.

Regardless of the ice locked, brutally hard ground underfoot and the howling gale which whipped freezing lances of ice across this barren hillside to scour any exposed flesh in minutes, Lludd Llaw Ereint was hundreds of miles south of Albion and on his knees. He was at home in southern Khumry and surrounded by a gang of very unusual looking slaves, as uniquely they were all well fed, hugely muscled and expensively clothed. Like no other slaves in Prydein, Lludd's men stood around this Khumric king in stoic silence, all booted, gloved and mantled warmly against this biting cold in thick leather and fur, and all were armed with spades, picks and digging forks. Quite alone, this infamous Khumric lord thought nothing of putting himself in such a vulnerable position, one which he had no doubt no other lord would ever contemplate. Lludd had no fear of these men as they were perhaps the luckiest and best kept slaves in all this land, and they were utterly loyal to him in response. Surrounded by his burly gang, Lludd was on his ice crusted and frozen knees at the end of a long, freshly dug and snakelike trench which stretched out behind him like an undulating yellow scar on this snowy, isolated hillside in Cwm Ystwyth. Leaning on his silver hand pressed deep into the frozen, antediluvian and pebble strewn mud of this shallow trench, Lludd's excited breath plumed into the freezing air. His blue eyes blazed with an atavistic fire as he looked avidly at the softly rounded, golden gravel in his living hand.

* * * * *

It was a beautiful, warm and blossom filled spring day, coming halfway through the hope filled month of Draenwen in this year 3913 since the creation of this wondrous earth. The hazy air was filled with excited birdsong as the land below it struggled gratefully back to the warm months and the world of the living. Cadwy and Eirwen looked down from the high veranda of their lodges and from this newly refurbished, southeastern corner of CaerCarwyn towering over their new tumony of

Bidog. Together, they gazed down over the growing town of Draenwen below them in this glorious spring sunshine and with a fierce sense of pride, not just from its stunning beauty. Dog violets and crocuses were sprouting everywhere, bejewelling the grassy banks all around the small town below, lifting their spirits and soothing the eye. The hawthorn for which this region was named also showed its worth with a dazzling display of blooms along both banks of the glinting bend of river far below them. They looked like two curving constellations of a billion white stars from this raw palisade and CaerCarwyn's bright new battlements, and the hillside alongside this caer was strewn with the same like summer snow. They had not waited the year and a day to tie their hands, and although Ederus had wanted the handfasting in CaerCamelon and Cridas had offered DunEil for the same, it was Eirwen who had decided finally that they would hold their fabulous royal handfasting right here in beautiful Draenwen. It had been a truly astonishing event for the people of the town and the region as a whole, as royal caravans had arrived in this part of their world from across Prydein and beyond, and the werrin of Bidog had come to know the real worth of their new lord tumon and his lady wife.

High above the newly embellished roof timbers and the bright thatching of his resplendent great hall below, Cadwy gazed down across this valley with Eirwen hugging his waist, and he smiled with a deep contentment that he never knew existed. The Gods and Goddesses of Prydein seemed content in their palaces, and the land below them was flourishing under Bel's rising and nourishing warmth. He had received a message this morning that Olwydd Hîr would also be attending tonight's feast, partly to check up on his oath sworn ward, but also to renew what both men had come to appreciate was a lasting friendship between them. He was also bringing some important news, and Cadwy could only wonder at the significance of this 'news of national import' Olwydd had mentioned in his message, but he looked forward to his arrival immensely, nonetheless. Cadwy's eyes were drawn upwards then at a blare of harsh cries in the sky above him and where he saw the worst of omens. A large flock of

ravens was heading unerringly south over this fortress, and he shivered, wondering at the dark meaning of their ominous appearance and their strange, arrow straight direction, particularly in this month. He shrugged his mouth as it was all in the hands of the Gods as it has always been, and it will be he was sure until the end of days.

“Come on my love, let’s get those feet up on a silk cushion. They look a little swollen again today.” He said softly, and he drew Eirwen into his arms, kissing her deeply.

“I love you Cadwy.” She told him when they parted breathlessly, staring deeply into his eyes. “I do love it here too, and I wonder what the rest of this new year will bring us?” She asked him, one hand on her protruding belly. “Apart from the obvious of course!” She giggled; her huge green eyes alive with her excitement. They captured him and they squeezed his heart, as they had always done from that cataclysmic moment on Ynys Medcaut when they had both been struck squarely between the eyes by the *Thunderbolt of Cythera*. An event which seemed so long ago to Cadwy, it seemed now like a different life.

“I wonder too.” He answered her absently, his scar puckering. Shadows formed, deep in his cerulean eyes as he took a last look over her shoulder and up to the stark omen of those black ravens, dwindling now as they headed south like an arrow of doom into the blue heavens. Squashing a shiver of apprehension, Cadwy reaffirmed his grip on Eirwen’s elbow, and he led her into the comfort of his caer. He supported her all the way to the comfortable chair by the fire and the silk foot cushion he had asked a servant to fetch for him. With three days of reunited friendships and the long feasting and celebrations ahead of them, Eirwen was going to need her rest.

Diweddu - The End.

‘Isarno Gwaed ac Aberthu’ – Iron Blood & Sacrifice.
Cymru am byth!

Morning of the Galanas (blood-feud).

Morning breaks like blood in milk with heavenly Gwenwyn moving massive, as Maev's ships once choked the Western Isles to conquer western passage.

Once more pretenders come in monumental dust with sacred blood-oaths done, approaching with a warring gait toward out hilltop dun.

The melody of metal *chinc* and *chirp* of leather strap on blessed bronze chamfrein sings out. Strident steps are heard where frost still dwells and laboured breath, but with hoof-fall muffled well.

A spit for luck and merry jape for some, with glance askew to overcome death's pending wings, but most brood silent with unspoken prayer, contemplating 'ere this ruddy morning brings.

Cornonnyn and his eager host await this bloody banquet rare, to dark rejoice the blood-drenched spillers and the spoilers of this ancient land the valiant share.

Superstitions freely swim as white druidic gowns glide past, with shrieking mien and hooded countenance, they utter black prayers of a dark repast.

Whilst in our naked vanguard our wire-lipped Sisters now unfurl, entranced in spirit for the Gods alone, inspired with torc and single sacred blade to whirl.

Spirits move as fleeing ghosts, to flit through men and women like a vengeful host. They torture thoughts, spur-on to bright emotion without pause, but tempered with Brythonic courage this day and a vital, noble cause.

Now this ruddy morning cold, our cenedl draw near in pride, and cefndr too it will be told. Now 'gelyn' fierce from treflan near, and to this caer they stride, with gimlet eyes and shining steel to claim their owed 'sarhaed'.

Our cousins come with good intent for this Galanas must be made, for four-score years was lent, but payment now their lord commands, in blood and many broken hearts this ruddy day forlorn demands.

Come the colours - come our lords to affably confer, the fate of all who watch with bated breath and honest, mortal fear.

They bow and posture as their line befits, as if they bid 'good-morrow!' so simple does the mantle fit, yet to their rear their meagre werrin drown in everlasting sorrow.

Gathered are the clans again, to rage and to scour this meadow sweet as Beli did and Leir before, with guile and magic did those dragons speak.

So swift were they who ruled the sky, and more fleeting in life than sad
Blodeuwedd's tearful eye.

Once more come champions for their 'right', in meat as well as battle.
They come to stoutly claim the 'ran y rhyswr' and to test their edge of
metal.

To arms we rush, with dog and horse and carbad swift, led by our flaming-
crowns so bold, who dance as Lord Gofannon's fiery gift and blithely face
our countrymen of old.

Oh raucous clamour! Fateful din! How can thy gŵyrd make claim to win?
What token fee collected here, with honours claimed of vaunted bri or the
conquering of fear?

Tradition lives in our red blood, and favoured is the bard so well, for he as
Taliesin spoke in music chains of silver-chased shall live for all the ages
yet to tell.

A 'shield of silver' we all should keep, together and with a blissful heart in
all that we hold dear. So our poor werrin nevermore be filled with mortal
fear and be forced to bitter weep.

For if our hips were gladly joined along with mighty thigh, and shield-arms
linked with shining terror held up high. No threat from alien shores would
ever fall on these men of everlasting fame; Brython's noble heads of
shining mail, forged in Gofannon's blinding flame.

But as the humble bee who only sees his fragrant rows, yet his life is full,
enchanted by what flowers speak in whispered scented prose.

But nothing of these fated souls in armoured fury does it know, and just as
happy should we be in similar repose.

For if this bloody task and blow delivered so ill, be traded for a sight so
pure as a snowdrop lee, or a dew-soaked meadow in the evening still, so
happy would we be.

We Brythons could if truth be told, live as lifelong brothers strong and bold
in a paradise of shared goodwill. Far improved from endless strife and a
black, jagged fortress on a lonely hill.

Eifion Wyn Williams.



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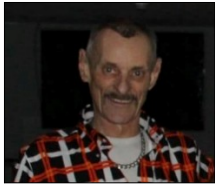
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Eifion Wyn Williams - Author Biography.

I am a 67-year-old Welshman, father and grandfather living in rural Buckinghamshire, England. I was brought up in Snowdonia by a family of teachers, historians and poets, and my father, one of nine children was the headmaster of my infant and junior school. This was Llanllechid Primary in Rachub, a tiny stone and slate village situated high in the cold foothills of Snowdon and above the small town of Bethesda. With so many uncles and aunts (four of whom were teachers) and countless cousins, I was lucky enough to receive a *proper* Welsh education, and I was imbued from infancy with a deep and abiding love for our ancient and glorious *true* history, not the deeply corrupted, highly politicised and Anglicised history all the children of Britain have been force fed by our English masters since the 19th century.

My blind Taid (Grandfather) was an orator and a storyteller of note, and I recall vividly our huge family squashed into the front parlour in Nain and Taid's terraced house on Madoc Street Porthmadoc listening to his tales. The whole family would be there for these historical stories with all the doors thrown open, and the tiny little 'two-up, two-down' terraced house would be jam packed. Told with an elder teacher's love of his language and his history, and in a deep and musical baritone I can hear to this day, he was inspired to verbosity by his blindness, but we could all tell he enjoyed it. I can still smell the coal fire and the whisky, the sweet sherry and the fragrant smoke that curled from his long pipe as he spun wondrous images before our eyes, firing our already vivid imaginations with tales of dark druids and magic, glimmering warriors like Lludd Llaw Ereint (silver-hand) and Lleu Llaw Gyffes (agile-handed), both of whom feature in these stories. Always dressed in a pinstriped three-piece suit, Taid would stand by the mantelpiece, puff his pipe and talk for hours whilst my brother and I would sit on the floor in one corner, completely entranced. He spoke of God-like, ancient warriors like Beli Mawr, even both great Arthurs and a huge, terrifying giant called Yspaddaden Pencawr, who lived nearby and actually *ate* naughty children! This then was the foundation to my historical and my cultural education which is of course a never-ending process.

I have been writing creatively for over forty years, and these truly ancient stories of my grandfather have been rattling around inside me for as long as I can remember. So, a few years ago I gave up my work as a freelance writer and set out to commit some of these ancient tales to text. The main themes I wanted to write about were in the 'Mabinogion' era, which include the Romans and Julius Caesar's invasions of 55 & 54 BC. So, I set out to research these ancient and untold events and with a determination to bring these almost forgotten stories back to life and into the 21st century. In that time, I have managed to produce a trilogy of historical fiction novels encompassing these portentous happenings from more than two millennia ago and which I have entitled *Iron Blood & Sacrifice*; (*The Sons of Beli Mawr*, *The Sacking of Bidog* & *Return of the Yellow Dog*). I am hoping this trilogy of historical novels will appeal to a broad readership and not just those who are interested in our ancient history, as they

are novels of adventure, love, humour and bloody conquest at the end of the day. They also have an old-fashioned streak of romanticism running through them, as they were after all written by an incurable romantic and in a proud Welsh tradition.

Please go to <https://iffy88227.wixsite.com/sonsofbelimawr> for updates on new releases and to join the 'Iron Blood & Sacrifice' community!